

BIBLICAL STUDIES, THEOLOGY, RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

An Introduction for African Universities

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- Biblical Studies, Theology, Religion and Philosophy: An Introduction for African Universities*,
General Editor: James N. Amanze (2010)

**Biblical Studies,
Theology, Religion and Philosophy:
*An Introduction for African Universities***

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Zapf Chancery

Eldoret, Kenya

First Published 2010

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Cover Concept and Design

Edwin K. Amanze

Associate Designer and Typesetter

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Copyediting

Cathy Burgess

Phill Chesworth

Benson Shiholo

Leona Wisoker

Editor and Publishing Consultant

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Printed by

Kijabe Printing Press,

P. O. Box 40,

Kijabe.

Published by



Zapf Chancery Research Consultants and Publishers,

P. O. Box 4988,

Eldoret, Kenya.

Email: zapfchancerykenya@yahoo.co.uk

Mobile: 0721-222 311

ISBN 978-9966-7341-2-9

*This book has been printed on fully
recyclable, environment-friendly paper.*

Acknowledgements

This work is a result of the cooperation of several scholars, who agreed to sacrifice their time to write most chapters of this book. Judging by its complexity and comprehensiveness, it appears to us that a lot of time was devoted to arduous research in the production of this magnificent work. We would like to take this opportunity to thank those who volunteered information in the field, which enabled us to write some of the chapters of this book. We would also like to extend our sincere thanks to the Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE-WCC) in Geneva and the Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland, for their financial assistance, which enabled us to complete this work. We are particularly indebted to Dietrich Werner, Maureen Trott, Verena Grueter, Owe Boersma and Sylvia Camacho for their encouragement and moral support in our endeavour to publish this book which we hope will contribute tremendously to ecumenical theological education in Africa for the advancement of God's Kingdom on earth.

Our deep gratitude goes to members of staff in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana and outside the department who read a number of chapters of this book and provided critical and scholarly comments on the content and outlook of the book and suggested ways and means of improving the text to enhance its academic usefulness. Space does not allow us to mention each one of them by name but to them all we say "You are great scholars, keep it up." We dedicate this book to all peace loving daughters and sons of Africa in their endeavour to make our continent a better place to live in.

Finally, we gratefully acknowledge the expert cooperation of our publishers M/S Zapf Chancery Research Consultants and Publishers (Kenya) under the publishing consultancy of the Rev. C. B. Peter and his dedicated team of copyeditors in Kenya, UK, and USA in producing this book to professional standards.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	v
<i>Introduction</i>	1
Part One: Biblical Studies	
Chapter One: The Bible: A History of Interpretation and Methods (<i>Johanna Stiebert, Univesity of Tennessee</i>)	11
Chapter Two: An Overview of the Old Testament (<i>Lovemore Togarasei, University of Botswana</i>)	37
Chapter Three: Major Themes in the Old Testament (<i>Masego Kanis and Lovemore Togarasei, University of Botswana</i>)	53
Chapter Four: A Survey of the New Testament (<i>Lovemore Togarasei , University of Botswana</i>)	69
Chapter Five: Major Themes in the New Testament (<i>Tlali Lerotholi National University of Lesotho</i>)	89
Chapter Six: Religion, Race, Gender and Identity (<i>Musa W. Dube, University of Botswana</i>)	107
Chapter Seven: Reading and Understanding the Bible as an African (<i>James N. Amanze University of Botswana</i>)	115
Part Two: Theology	
Chapter Eight: Introduction to Christian Theology: Its Tasks and Methods (<i>James N. Amanze, University of Botswana</i>)	139
Chapter Nine: African Theology: A Contextual Analysis of Zimbabwe (<i>Tabona Shoko, University of Zimbabwe</i>)	163

Chapter Ten: Rethinking the Role of Liberation Theology
(Moji Africa Ruele, University of Botswana)177

Chapter Eleven: Major Themes in Black Theology
(Francis C. L. Rakotsoane, National University of Lesotho) 201

Chapter Twelve: What is in a Name?-Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women’s Theologies *(Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, University of Kwazulu-Natal)*213

Chapter Thirteen: Theology of African Independent Churches
(Obel N. Kealotse, University of Botswana) 229

Part Three: Religious Studies

Chapter Fourteen: Introduction to Religious Studies *(Francis Rakotsoane, National University of Lesotho)*..... 251

Chapter Fifteen: Phenomenology of Religion *(Ezra Chitando, University of Zimbabwe)* 263

Chapter Sixteen: African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Africa: Challenges and Prospects *(James N. Amanze, University of Botswana)* 283

Chapter Seventeen: Christianity in Africa in the 20th Century
(Fidelis Nkomazana, University of Botswana) 313

Chapter Eighteen: Africa’s Muslims: Expressing Their Religious Identity
(Muhammed Haron, University of Botswana) 343

Chapter Nineteen: Hinduism and Buddhism: An introduction
(Garth Mason, University of Botswana)381

Part Four: Philosophy

Chapter Twenty: A General Introduction to Philosophy: Its Tasks and Methods *(T. A. Chimuka, University of Zimbabwe)* 399

Chapter Twenty One: Logic, Critical Thinking, and Science
(I. B. Ikpe, University of Botswana) 415

Chapter Twenty Two: Introduction to Epistemology
(Louis M. Manyeli, National University of Lesotho)437

Chapter Twenty Three: African Philosophy (<i>John Ayotunde Bewaji, University of West Indies</i>)	457
Chapter Twenty Four: Moral Theories (<i>Simon Mawondo, National University of Lesotho</i>)	495
Chapter Twenty Five: Applied Ethics (<i>Joseph B. R. Gaie, University of Botswana</i>).....	517
Chapter Twenty Six: Philosophical Metaphysics in Africa (<i>Kipton Jensen, University of Botswana</i>)	539
Bibliography	555
Contributors	591
Index of Personal Names	595
Index of Subjects	600

Introduction

This book introduces students to the study of Biblical studies, theology, religion and philosophy from an African perspective. It has been written by scholars with great international reputations and with many years' experience in teaching and research at reputable international universities. It is, therefore, an excellent and indispensable tool for learning and will become a companion for life. The book comprises twenty six chapters divided into four sections. The first section deals with Biblical studies, the second with theology, the third with religion and the fourth with philosophy.

In chapter one, Johanna Stiebert introduces students to Biblical interpretation. She begins by noting that Biblical criticism was once almost entirely the preserve of university-educated, white, western males and that most interpreters were Christians. Nowadays however, many more voices, of those once absent or marginalized, have actively joined in the interpretation of Biblical texts. Among these are people from other religious traditions or none, as well as interpreters who are women, or black, or from non-western nations, or homosexual, or with HIV/AIDS or with experience of HIV/AIDS—to name just a few! She notes that Biblical criticism is now a more varied and vibrant discipline and comments that voices from Africa add considerably to this diversity. The author also observes that there has been a shift in Biblical interpretation towards subjectivity. Whilst in the past the emphasis was on the text of the Bible, nowadays it is on the interpreter of the text.

In chapter two, Lovemore Togarasei provides an overview of the Hebrew Bible. This chapter is divided into seven sections. The first gives the geographical, historical, cultural and religious background of the books of the Old Testament. The second looks at the origins of the canon of the Hebrew Bible. The third is a survey of the main themes in the books of Law. The fourth focuses on the books of History, highlighting the emergence of Israel as a nation. The fifth is a discussion of the Writings. The sixth introduces the books of the Prophets. Section seven looks at the close of the Old Testament followed by a conclusion to the chapter. An attempt is made throughout this chapter to survey the Old Testament with an African eye. This means reading the books contextually, highlighting how the books have been and continue to be used to shape African lives. This is particularly appropriate because Christianity is fast becoming an African religion.

In the third chapter, Masego Kanis and Lovemore Togarasei focus on the major themes in the Old Testament. These are derived from a careful analysis of events that had an impact on the history and lives of the Israelites. The authors approach the Old

Testament as the story of the salvation brought to the Israelites by God. In its books the Israelites expressed their understanding of who God is, what he had done in their lives and what they ought to do as his chosen people. The pattern of the identified themes is this: God continually desires a relationship with his chosen people through the covenant he has made with them, whereas they, in their quest to find their own place in a world rife with pagan practices, frequently walk away from the covenantal agreement.

In chapter four, Lovemore Togarasei introduces students to the different ways of studying the New Testament (NT). The first way is the synthetic approach, where one takes an overview of the whole New Testament in order to understand its overall message. The second is the analytic approach where one makes an in-depth analysis of the verses that make up the books of the NT. The third is the thematic approach where one focuses on the various themes of the NT. He notes that there are, in addition, other methods of reading the NT. As this chapter is mainly meant for those beginning NT studies, Togarasei recommends the synthetic approach. He considers that it enables the beginner to grasp the whole picture of NT studies, thereby providing the stepping-stones for further studies. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section discusses the meaning and origin of the NT. It is followed in the second section by a discussion of the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. The third section focuses on the Pauline letters and is followed in the fourth section by a discussion of the non-Pauline/general letters. The final section discusses the apocalyptic book of Revelation.

In the fifth chapter, Cladi Lerotholi focuses on the major New Testament themes found across the twenty-seven New Testament writings. It is a selective study of some of the main themes of the New Testament, chosen for their theological significance. These themes are not studied in isolation from one another but in unison. The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. Firstly, it aims to familiarize readers with the major themes of the New Testament and their theological import, and secondly to acquaint readers with some methods of interpretation. It is aimed at men and women, teachers and students. It has an all-embracing approach.

In chapter six, Musa Dube tells three stories as samples of how the ideologies of gender and racism can be legitimized through religion. There are many other stories of origin and identity which are not found in religious texts which also propound ideologies of inequality and authorize marginalization. She notes that all these stories, wherever and whenever they are told, present the reader/hearer with values that make it acceptable to discriminate against one nation, ethnic group, people or against women. In other words, they normalize discrimination. Dube observes that stories are central to our lives. They inform and influence social values, identity and our world. There is, therefore, a need to arrest their negative ideologies. This chapter shows how feminist theologians and liberation leaders should be dealing with the issues of gender from a Biblical theological perspective.

In the seventh chapter, James N. Amanze argues that it is acceptable to read and understand the Bible as an African. He observes that when the Bible was introduced

in Africa it was presented in European thought forms which were foreign to the African way of life. As a result, it hampered the development of Christianity in Africa for a very long time. But with the passing of time there was a felt need to translate the Bible into the vernacular and interpret it in the context of the African culture in order to enable African people to read and understand the Bible in their own terms. This has accelerated the pace of the expansion of Christianity in Africa. Amanze also discusses the attempts that have been made by missionaries in the mainline churches as well as church leaders in the African Independent Churches to indigenise the Bible.

In chapter eight, James N. Amanze introduces students to the study of Christian Theology as an academic discipline. The chapter begins by defining Christian Theology and then examines its evolution from the apostolic period to the present. Amanze also notes the problematic nature of theology as a scientific discipline. The chapter discusses the chief characteristics of theology, the task of theology and theologians, sources for doing theology, theological methods, major branches of theology and the use of theology today. It also underlines the importance and significance of theology as an academic discipline noting that if taken seriously it can be very challenging, exciting, enriching and thought-provoking. It can even be useful in the job market. The various types of theology that have emerged in the 20th century, commonly known as Third World Theologies, are also discussed.

In the ninth chapter, Tabona Shoko explores the contribution of African scholarship to African theology in Zimbabwe. He starts with a brief history of the church in Zimbabwe, describing the missionary incursion in the country. Then he tracks the growth and development of African theology in the contexts of pre- and post-independence before capturing the contemporary contextualisation of African theology. The chapter underlines the need to respect within the Church in Zimbabwe African beliefs and practices such as the use of drums, whistles and vigorous dancing. Shoko observes that Shona belief in God, the mediatory role of the ancestors, and traditional medical practices receive serious attention in African Christianity in Zimbabwe. This has contributed to their tremendous growth. He argues that the challenge for theology in Zimbabwe is to pursue inter-religious dialogue and engage in an interdisciplinary approach that translates into a universal gospel of Christ that appeals to all humankind.

In the tenth chapter, Moji Africa Ruele discusses the relevance of Liberation Theology in the Twentieth Century. He begins by defining Liberation Theology, highlighting its sources and tasks and applying its method to current social ills. He places Latin American Liberation Theology in the family of Theologies of Liberation that have been influential across the world in general and in Africa in particular. He also discusses a wide range of complex issues challenging its *modus operandi*. He answers some of the questions that are raised by both students and other academics regarding the relevance of this theological discourse in the context of the new socio-economic climate. Globalization and the demise of systems such as Colonialism and Apartheid have brought into being a new era of political independence in the former colonised countries.

In chapter eleven, Francis Rakotsoane discusses Black Theology. He observes that the focal concern of Black Theology is the fact of oppression, along with the concomitant indignities experienced by black people in various parts of the world. He notes that the usual theological discussions about God, Christ, salvation and other topics are irrelevant if they do not relate to the experience of the black people in this world. He observes that Black Theology has made valuable contributions to theological discussion today. Its most outstanding contribution is the holistic nature of salvation. He argues that in contrast to the dominant Greek view of reality found in traditional theology, which pays very little attention to the physical nature of man and puts undue emphasis on the spirit, Black Theology acknowledges a unity of man's being and man's ultimate physical deliverance.

In the twelfth chapter, Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar explore the rationale behind the differences in terminology used within feminist theologies, particularly those of African women's theologies, highlighting in each case the positive and negative aspects of each feature. The chapter makes a case for African women's theologies to be recognized as an authentic discipline in and of itself within the study of theology, while at the same time recognizing the pervasive inter-disciplinary nature of African women's theologies as one of its strengths. The chapter reveals the richness and diversity of feminist theological discourse. It highlights the methodological and theoretical perspectives that undergird African women's theologies and notes that more theoretical work needs to be done in this area.

In the thirteenth chapter, Obed N. Kealotswe discusses the theology of African Independent Churches (AICs) in Southern Africa. The chapter focuses on Southern Africa but with implications for the whole of Africa. The author argues that there has been a theological shift in the AICs, which could be divided into three stages. The first stage was the anti-missionary stage where the theology of the AICs was debatable and labelled syncretistic. The second stage was the collaborative and ecumenical stage where the AICs began to be recognised by the mission-founded churches. The third stage is the present, where the AICs are struggling to be relevant to their communities and societies by addressing real issues faced by their members. The chapter draws examples from Botswana which seem to have some implications for the whole of Africa. Major theological themes such as God, Trinity, Pneumatology, soteriology, eschatology, baptism, Holy Communion and others are discussed.

In chapter fourteen, Francis Rakotsoane introduces students to the scientific study of religion. He notes that Religious Studies as an academic discipline is a systematic study by scholars and researchers whereby they investigate religion and religious phenomena, applying a variety of scientific methods. He observes that it involves a multidisciplinary approach, including the study of religious beliefs, religious behaviour and institutions. Religious Studies emphasizes systematic, historically-based and cross-cultural description, comparison, interpretation and explanation of religious phenomena.

In the fifteenth chapter, Ezra Chitando examines the phenomenology of religion. The first section of the chapter describes its historical development. The second section

examines its key concepts. The third section outlines its popularity in Africa. The fourth section considers emerging discussions concerning the phenomenology of religion. The conclusion offers some reflections on how the phenomenology of religion could be strengthened. This method in the study of religion is rated highly in Africa though it has come under severe criticism in Europe and America. Critics of this approach have drawn attention to inherent weaknesses in its key principles, as well as exposing the limitations of its ideals. Despite these weaknesses, it continues to be a viable approach in the academic study of religion.

In chapter sixteen, James N. Amanze introduces students to the study of African Traditional Religion (ATR) as an academic subject. The author provides a working definition of ATR and examines its nature and importance among the African people. He also discusses the sources available for the study of ATR. This chapter also discusses some of the major aspects of ATR such as belief in God, the position and role of the ancestors, the role of religious specialists, and some practices and ceremonies that give ATR its distinctive features. Finally, the chapter examines the challenges and prospects that are faced by ATR in contemporary Africa, mainly in regard to its relationship with Islam and Christianity.

In the seventeenth chapter, Fidelis Nkomazana investigates Christianity in the 20th century. He examines various themes in a variety of regional contexts. The chapter explores, among other things, African indigenous/initiated/ independent churches that have indigenized Christianity to suit their own cultural and theological needs. He also looks at the reasons for the creation of these churches. He notes that, together with Pentecostal Churches and the Charismatic movement, they are the fastest-growing Churches in Africa. He observes that Christianity has faced many challenges, in both the past and the present, such as colonization, racism, splits, secularism, globalization, modernity, consumerism, technology and other advances of the twenty-first century. All these challenges, Nkomazana argues, need appropriate responses if the Church in Africa is to survive the modern challenges faced by African Christianity today.

In chapter eighteen, Muhammed Haron discusses how 'African Islam' has expressed itself throughout the 20th century. The chapter covers four interconnected issues. First, it sketches the socio-historical developments of Muslims during the late 19th century to act as a backdrop to the developments during the 20th century. Thereafter the chapter provides an overview of the demographics of Muslims on the continent. This is followed by a sketch of the state of Muslims in Africa with special focus on those populating the South of the Sahara. The chapter's last part looks at certain issues that have challenged the very identity and expression of Islam and Muslims in Africa. The chapter does not explore the beliefs and practices of Islam since these have been dealt with in other scholarly essays contained in recent publications.

In the nineteenth chapter, Garth Mason introduces students to the study of Hinduism and Buddhism. The chapter provides an outline of the origin and development of these very important world religions and their spread from their countries of origin

and introduction into Africa, with particular reference to Southern Africa. He notes that studies into Hinduism and Buddhism are part of a larger search for global meaning and that this is a difficult and demanding task. He observes that though these two world religions are different from other religions, they are not evil but an integral part of humanity, and therefore worthy to be studied. The study of other religions ultimately provides an understanding between cultures. When understanding is reached, a powerful point is made. It enhances the unity and solidarity of people across the world.

In chapter twenty, Andy Chimuka introduces philosophy to students who have never studied it formally. He defines philosophy and sketches, with broad strokes, the general aims and methods employed in the study of the discipline. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first concentrates on a working definition. The next section examines the aims and activities of philosophers. The third section examines the various methods employed by practitioners and students of philosophy and the last focuses on the value of philosophy. The author notes that there is no systematic body of knowledge called “philosophy”. There are, instead, people trying to think systematically about the fundamental questions of life. He further observes that the great thinkers of the past differed in their conclusions, and today’s philosophers also differ from one another in their conclusions. According to Chimuka, the most enduring value of philosophy lies in the habit of mind it breeds in those who have discovered its pleasures.

In the twenty-first chapter, I. B. Ikpe delves into the area of Critical Thinking. The author notes that critical thinking embodies the process and product of thinking correctly, both within a formal academic enterprise and within the informal situations of everyday life. He observes that more often than not, it is the product of critical thinking that is usually recognized and celebrated as critical thinking. According to Ikpe, critical thinking is not a game of chance. In this chapter Ikpe makes a case that those with formal training can consciously make critical thinking an aspect of their lives and by so doing, consciously guard against the different pitfalls that result from mistakes in reasoning. He observes that though the skills associated with critical thinking are not necessarily acquired in the classroom, a formal study of Critical Thinking is beneficial, especially in an increasingly globalized world.

In chapter twenty two, Louis Manyeli introduces students to epistemology. The first part defines and explains epistemology. The second part discusses the question of whether scepticism is possible. The third part responds to the question of how knowledge is obtained. On the one hand, philosophers holding the view that knowledge is obtained through the use of reason are called rationalists. On the other hand, those who maintain the view that people obtain knowledge through sense experience are referred to as empiricists. Manyeli has selected a classic and prominent philosopher of epistemology by the name of Plato as his example of a rationalist. Because of Plato’s important contribution in epistemology, Manyeli discusses his rationalism extensively. He discusses Locke as a prominent example of an empiricist.

In chapter twenty three, John Ayotunde Bewaji discusses African Philosophy. The chapter is divided into five sections. In the first section, he deals with the nature

of philosophy and the relationship between philosophy, life or existence, and culture. In the second section, he considers the nature of African philosophy, as an intellectual reflection on and of life, or existence, or reality, and also on, and of, culture. In the third section, he examines African philosophy's travails in intellectual discourse in Africa and elsewhere, its various epochs, historical and contemporary concerns, and the debates within African philosophy. In the fourth section he discusses the branches of African Philosophy. In the fifth section, he notes the probable directions for African philosophical research in the future and brings together the conclusions that flow from this discussion. In view of the limited space available, the author can only sketch an outline of some aspects of the discussion and enjoins the reader to use the references provided to augment the discussion.

In the twenty fourth chapter, the late Simon Mawondo discusses Moral Philosophy or ethics. The author notes that Moral philosophy is the study of right and wrong. It aims to both understand the nature of right and wrong in human actions and to help us conduct our lives in accordance with that understanding. For this reason, it has both a theoretical and a practical dimension. The subject matter of ethics is of fundamental importance in the ordering of personal and social life. In this chapter Mawondo explains the different types of enquiry that make up the study of ethics, before distinguishing ethics from law and religion. Following that he discusses the main theories in ethics, using ethics and morality interchangeably. The moral theories discussed in the chapter give a good idea of what is required of a credible moral theory.

In chapter twenty five, Joseph B. R. Gaie discusses Applied Ethics. He gives a definition of Applied Ethics by first defining Philosophy and then showing the place of Ethics in Philosophy generally and that of Applied Ethics in particular. He argues that in the case of the Setswana tradition there is no separation between theory and practice. It is, therefore, clear that ethics permeates the whole of human life. Within the chapter he gives some examples of issues that are discussed in Applied Ethics such HIV and AIDS, business, politics and sports.

In the twenty sixth chapter, Kipton Jensen introduces students to Metaphysics. According to Jensen, metaphysics, as a philosophical discipline, is preoccupied with several perplexing and seemingly perennial questions concerning the structure of reality. He notes that more specific definitions of philosophical metaphysics depend on one's approach to the discipline of philosophy itself. The chapter is divided into several sections. Section one deals with three instructive approaches to the philosophical enterprise in Africa (namely, ethno-philosophy, universalism, and philosophical sagacity). Section two introduces the history of metaphysics since the time of Aristotle (384-322 BCE), to whom Aquinas (1225-1275) referred simply as "the philosopher" and with whom the technical term "metaphysics" is traditionally associated. The philosophical themes contained within this domain of thought are not only "pre-Socratic" but perhaps as old as the human species itself. Section three discusses metaphysical questions thematically. The author notes that Philosophical Metaphysics in Africa is a vibrant academic discipline, one that has theoretical as well as practical importance. The task of philosophical metaphysics in Africa involves recovering metaphysical traditions.

All in all, we hope that this compendium will prove to be a valuable tool of reference for students in area of study commonly covered under the Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies Departments in Africa Universities. It has been written with them in mind.

James N. Amanze
General Editor

CHAPTER ONE

The Bible: A History of Interpretation and Methods

Johanna Stiebert

Introduction

The Bible is the number one bestseller. It has been a unified, widely used, read and studied text for so long that it is easy to forget that the Bible did not always exist. Also, it did not fall out of heaven in one immaculate piece! The story of the formation of the Bible and, subsequently, of its interpretation, is much more complicated than that. The word “bible” comes from the Greek *ta biblia*, meaning “books,” because the Bible consists of many shorter compositions (“the book of Genesis,” “the book of Isaiah,” etc.). Actually, there are several bibles, because in different religious communities different collections of these shorter books are considered to have authority. The Jewish community has a shorter canon¹ than the Christian community: the Jewish canon contains only the texts Christians call “The Old Testament.”² Also, different Christians sometimes have different canons! The Protestant canon is shorter than all of the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox canons. Each of these bibles grew into the different one-volume texts we have today over a lengthy period of time and as a consequence of complex processes. In this chapter we will look at how the Bible - keeping in mind that this word means different things to different people - has been interpreted. Before we begin, let us explain and clarify three important points.

First of all, because the Bible is not just a book but a canon, interpretation of it can take several distinct forms. You may have heard believers say that the Bible is “divinely inspired,” or “the revelation of God,” or “the word of God.” This means that for them the words of the Bible have a special significance. Among believers, however,

¹The word “canon” refers to the text(s) a faith community considers *authoritative* (the technical word is “normative”). Several religions have canons. The canon of the Muslim community is the Koran; the Christian community, the Bible.

²In the Jewish community the Old Testament is called “Tanakh.” Another name for the same collection of writings is “Hebrew Bible.” There is a very long history of interpretation of canonical texts in the Jewish tradition. We cannot deal with this fascinating and complex history here. For further investigation I recommend Rabbi Joseph Telushkin’s *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), especially 525–42.

there is a range of ways of reading and interpreting these significant words. Some believe that all the words of the Bible are of timeless relevance and true in a literal sense. So, when the creation story of Genesis 1, for example, says that God created the heavens and the earth in six days, they believe this *exactly* as it is written. We call such interpretations “absolutist” or “fundamentalist.” Other believers are more flexible in their readings. They may believe, for example, that “six days” refers to six stages or eras (i.e. periods of time far exceeding days), or even that Genesis 1 is above all an ancient story, or myth, reflecting how our ancestors understood the origins of the world. Such interpreters can be said to be more liberal, or to favour allegorical³ rather than literal readings. Some readers of the Bible do not read it for spiritual guidance, as believers do. They may be agnostics or atheists.⁴ Biblical scholars, on the other hand (who may or may not be believers) tend to emphasize academic methods of biblical criticism (like the ones described below).⁵

Secondly, because the Bible is (a) an ancient text and (b) a text that is today read and used by many different peoples in all parts of the world, there is tremendous diversity of biblical interpretation. We will be taking a *diachronic* approach to interpretation of the Bible. This means, we will look at interpretation *through time*. Early modern criticism of the Bible (our focus here) was dominated by institutions in the west, in Europe and the United States of America. This, despite the fact that there are several ancient Jewish communities on the continent of Africa, as well as some of the most ancient Christian communities. In recent years this has changed considerably.

³An allegory is a story that discusses one subject under the guise of another. The parables of Jesus are a kind of allegory. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), for example, is not a literally true story about a *real* priest, Levite and Samaritan but a story about how to love one’s neighbour. Some readers of Genesis 2:4-3:24, the story of Adam and Eve, interpret this story allegorically rather than literally, too. This means they do *not* read it as being literally about the first man shaped from dust, the woman made from the man’s rib and the talking serpent in the Garden of Eden (the way a fundamentalist or absolutist would read the story) but as a story about growing up and acquiring knowledge. Eden is like our childhood, a happy state of innocence, with no shame, where we are unconcerned about our nakedness. Growing up, however, brings with it a sense of shame and also hardships and responsibilities. The advantages of growing up, however, are the opportunity to enter an adult relationship and the fulfilments attending the challenges of work and parenthood. In such an interpretation the talking serpent and the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil are not a *real* serpent and tree but symbolic of reaching maturity. The story can thus be read and understood allegorically or literally.

⁴An agnostic is someone who says they simply *do not know* if there is a god. An atheist is someone who *denies the existence of any god*.

⁵For our purposes the word “criticism” does *not* refer to a negative or fault-finding way of interpreting. We are using the word “criticism” to refer to a close, analytical and scholarly method of reading.

The topic of Africa in the Bible is receiving a lot of attention.⁶ Also, interpreters in Africa, as well as other formerly marginalized places in the world, are adding strong voices to academic debates from which they were once excluded. Particularly since the 1990s, methodologies of interpretation such as postcolonial criticism and womanist criticism (see below) have found strong proponents among African scholars. Scholars from Africa are increasingly well-represented amongst the most vibrant contributors to academic discussions in the areas of theology and religious studies.⁷

Thirdly, we need to understand the word “exegesis.”⁸ Exegesis is a Greek word meaning “to lead out.” It refers to the process of interpreting texts, especially biblical texts, with a view to establishing what they mean. As we will discover, there are different kinds of exegesis, which ask different questions and use different tools and methods. Whilst exegesis sometimes claims to be objective and to let the text speak for itself, it is important to admit that no reader is truly neutral, or without bias. Instead, who we are, what we have experienced and what we value (e. g. whether we are male/female, rich/impoverished, healthy/suffering from illness, etc.) will influence our choice of reading and how we interpret a text. Many modern methods of interpretation

⁶While it has all too often (and very unjustly) been played down or even ignored by western interpreters, Africa (in particular Egypt and East Africa) features prominently in the Bible. To cite but a few examples of Africans in the Bible: Abraham and Joseph had Egyptian wives, Hagar and Asenath respectively (Genesis 16 and 41:45), and Moses’ wife was Cushite (Numbers 12:1), from the region today called Sudan/Ethiopia. Also, the prophet Zephaniah had a Cushite father (Zephaniah 1:1) and an Ethiopian reader of the book of Isaiah was among the first to be baptized a Christian (Acts 8:26-39).

⁷Theology and religious studies are separate disciplines. Theology (meaning “the study of god”) studies god/s, religions and religious texts *from a faith perspective*. It probes such matters as divine inspiration and the nature of God, for example. Theology is an insiders’ subject and is usually undertaken by people who want to explore their own religious tradition. Religious studies, on the other hand, is a discipline that seeks to explore religious traditions from a more *objective* perspective. Religious studies is *anthropological* (anthropology means “the study of humankind”) in the sense that it studies what *people* believe and worship. Theology probes divine mysteries; religious studies probes how people construct what they believe to be divine mysteries. Religious studies is often comparative, looking at several religious traditions side by side. In so doing, it aims not to take sides or to elevate one religious tradition above another. In theology the assumption tends to be that a particular religious tradition is “the right one.”

⁸For a clear introduction to the subject, see John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner’s Handbook* rev. ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987), 5-32.

acknowledge such subjectivity.⁹ Such interpretations, which are often profoundly insightful, should admit to *eisegesis*, or “leading into” a text.

Two more important comments before we begin: first of all, the topic of biblical interpretation is vast. The earliest evidence of interpretation of biblical texts is as old as the oldest biblical texts!¹⁰ Our focus here will be the history of *modern* biblical interpretation, from about the late nineteenth century onwards. Even this, however, is a huge undertaking. For this reason, the survey provided here is highly selective: not all methods and types of biblical interpretation will be discussed here but rather a selective sample. For those of you who want to pursue matters further, there will be suggestions for further reading at the end of this chapter.

Secondly, whilst this chapter makes an effort to address methods of interpretation of particular interest to students on the continent of Africa, Africa is also a vast landmass with considerable internal complexity and diversity. Consequently, on this front, too, examples will be selective and a lot will, inevitably, be left unsaid. Again, I will suggest a few examples for further study to go some way towards redressing the simplification necessitated by the limited scope of this chapter. And now, let us get started on our diachronic look at the modern interpretation of the Bible.

The earliest exegetical approaches distinguish between *lower criticism* and *higher criticism*. Lower criticism refers to textual criticism, which seeks to establish, as far as is possible, the wording of the biblical text closest to the original. Higher criticism builds on lower criticism. With higher criticism, the text established through lower criticism is interpreted from a variety of angles. Literary criticism is a kind of higher criticism that explores literary features, types and structures of biblical texts; historical criticism is a kind of higher criticism that explores the historical context and development of biblical texts; feminist criticism is a kind of higher criticism that explores *either* how biblical texts provide us with positive role models for women, *or* how biblical texts aid in oppressing and demeaning women. There are many, many kinds of higher criticism. We will begin with the foundation: lower criticism.

⁹A *subjective* approach involves our personal bias or individual point of view. For example, someone who has done their best to follow their god but contracted a disease through no fault of their own and who suffers dreadful physical agonies and perhaps also rejection from their family and community, might find themselves drawn to and might identify very strongly with Job in the biblical book of the same name. Job also suffers through no fault of his own, loses his family and feels rejected by his friends and even by his god. The subjective reader will associate their experiences with what they read and this can lead to a very personalized interpretation. An *objective* approach makes an effort to keep one's personal thoughts and feelings out of the interpreting or exegetical process and to let the text speak for itself as much as possible.

¹⁰Below we will discuss a body of ancient manuscripts called the Dead Sea Scrolls. Among this literature were pieces of copies of all of the books of the Jewish canon - with the one exception of the book of Esther. Commentaries, or textual interpretations of some of these books, were also discovered: this literature is called the *peshar*-literature. One of the best-preserved examples is a *peshar* (interpretation) of the biblical book of Habakkuk.

Lower Criticism or Textual Criticism

There exist no original manuscripts of any of the books that make up the Bible. Scholars are divided as to how old the oldest books of the Hebrew Bible¹¹ really are. Fundamentalists believe that the oldest portions were set down in writing by God in the days of the prophet Moses (see Exodus 31:18) and the tradition has emerged that Moses wrote down the words of the entire Pentateuch¹² around the thirteenth century B.C.E.¹³ Other scholars (e.g. Julius Wellhausen, see below) attribute the earliest texts of the Hebrew Bible to the time of the early monarchy (the days of kings David and Solomon), which would date them to the tenth century B.C.E. Yet other scholars date even the earliest writings of the Hebrew Bible to the time after the exile in Babylon (that is, no earlier than the late sixth century B.C.E.). But *no* biblical texts as old as the sixth, tenth and certainly the thirteenth century B.C.E. exist. There are even no original texts of the New Testament in existence: there are no existent letters by Paul and even the oldest versions of the gospels do not reach back as far as the time when they were believed to have been composed.

The oldest texts associated with the Hebrew Bible were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, near the north-western shore of the Dead Sea in Israel, between the years 1947 and 1956 C.E. None of these texts are older than about 200 B.C.E. and most have survived only as small fragments. So, what we have are copies of copies of copies of ancient texts! Alongside the scroll¹⁴ and scroll fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the surviving ancient texts of the Bible are either tiny fragments or, if they are more substantial, from a much later time. (The oldest *complete* Hebrew Bible is called the Leningrad Codex and dates from 1008 C.E.) Many of the more ancient fragments and texts that we have are not in Hebrew but in translation. The Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek as early as the third century B.C.E. This translation is called the Septuagint. The Samaritan community had a version of the

¹¹We will use the name “Hebrew Bible” (see note 2 above), because it is the most neutral. The word “Hebrew” (meaning “traveller” or “sojourner”) refers to *both* the early nomadic ancestors of the Jewish people *and* to the language associated with them. Most of the Hebrew Bible was originally written in the Hebrew language.

¹²“Pentateuch” means “five vessels” and refers to the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Moses features prominently in the last four of these books. He dies in the final chapter of Deuteronomy.

¹³“B.C.E.” stands for “Before the Common Era” and is equivalent in terms of time to “B.C.”, which stands for “Before Christ.” The equivalent for “A.D.” (“Anno Domini,” Latin for “in the year of our Lord”) is C.E., “Common Era.” Scholars often use “B.C.E.” and “C.E.” instead of “B.C.” and “A.D.” because they are not Christian-specific and are therefore more neutral and inclusive. The thirteenth century B.C.E. refers to the 1200s B.C.E, the tenth century to the 900s, etc.

¹⁴One virtually intact scroll containing the book of the prophet Isaiah was discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls and dated to about 200 B.C.E. The next oldest, complete Hebrew text of Isaiah is in the Ben Asher Codex. This text is dated to 895 C.E. This makes the Dead Sea Scrolls text more than a millennium older.

Pentateuch of the Hebrew Bible in their own dialect. Other ancient translations are in Aramaic, Syriac and Latin. Again, only pieces of these ancient translations have survived and complete versions date from a much later time.

To make matters even more difficult, there is often disagreement between the ancient texts we *do* have! For instance, the Septuagint text of the book of Jeremiah is considerably shorter than the earliest Hebrew texts and it also presents the book's content in a different order; the Septuagint also contains an additional song in the book of Psalms and the Peshitta, the earliest Syriac translation, several more. Where the New Testament is concerned, the original language is a dialect of Greek called Koine. The books of the New Testament were then translated into Latin. Again, the existing versions have differences between them. All the oldest manuscripts of the gospel of John, for instance, lack 7:53-8:11, the story of Jesus and the woman accused of adultery.

Some of the textual variations seem to indicate different traditions but others are due to scribal errors, or deliberate scribal modifications. Let us remind ourselves that before machine printing was invented, manuscripts were copied by hand. Sometimes a scribe worked by copying a manuscript, at other times scribes wrote down dictation. Because scribes are only human, they occasionally made mistakes. Common mistakes include leaving out a letter, word or line that should be written twice (*haplography*); writing a letter, word or line twice instead of once (*dittography*); and leaving out a piece of text between two occurrences of the same word or phrase (*homoioteleuton*). Sometimes scribes may also have made alterations to a text with the intention of improving upon it (trying to make a meaning clearer, etc.).

What the textual critic tries to do is to take all of the available ancient texts and variants and to reconstruct as far as is possible the wording closest to the original. A textual critic is usually a) an accomplished linguist and b) skilled in dating and evaluating manuscripts. A textual critic also uses certain established principles to come to a decision. Here are a few examples:

Priority is generally given to manuscripts in the original language rather than in translation. Translation always entails changes in meaning. For this reason, a textual critic will give preference to manuscripts which are in Hebrew, the language in which most of the Hebrew Bible was first written, or, in the case of the New Testament, Koine Greek. Sometimes, however, a translation may preserve a better textual tradition than any of the available manuscripts in the original language. The Septuagint, for instance, is in many instances more reliable than the available Hebrew manuscripts.

Shorter is better. When a textual critic has two ancient texts in front of them and one is shorter than the other, the textual critic will usually judge the shorter text to be closer to the original wording. The reason is that a later copyist or editor is more likely to add to a text than to delete a part of it. Such adding might have been done to make a text more clear and understandable -but it diverts from the original.

Quality is preferable to quantity. A textual critic may have many versions of a text that contains one reading and just one or two that contain a different one. If the quality

of the less well-represented reading is better - perhaps because it is from an older manuscript, or from a manuscript containing fewer errors, or indicating less of a tendency to expand - the textual critic will judge it preferable over the many versions.

A difficult reading is preferable to an easy one. As with the second rule, a textual critic confronted with two different readings, of which one is more difficult than another, will usually choose the difficult one over the easier one, because, again, a later copyist or editor is more likely to smooth out difficulties than to create them.

A lot of careful textual criticism has to be undertaken *before* biblical texts can be translated into other languages. If you compare different English translations of the Bible you will notice sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle differences. In Genesis 1:2, for example, some Bibles give the translation “the Spirit of God (was hovering over the waters),” while others give “breath of God” or “wind of God.” Each of these words - “Spirit,” “breath,” “wind” - has a different charge. Word choice can be a matter of great debate and disagreement: which word best captures the idea conveyed by the Hebrew word? As the Bible has been translated into African languages, these debates have surfaced all over again: for example, does the southern African word “Modimo” adequately capture the Bible’s “God,” which translates “Elohim,” or does “Modimo” have too many associations that do not suit the biblical deity? A good bible will have *annotations* (i.e. notes), drawing your attention to difficult translational matters or to important textual variants.

SOME EXAMPLES OF HIGHER CRITICISM

Source Criticism

Although biblical texts have been read, studied, exegeted and interpreted for centuries in both Jewish and Christian communities, it was not until the late nineteenth century C.E. that their integrity was seriously challenged. Even before then, careful readers had noticed that both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament contained repetitions, inconsistencies, even contradictions. In the Hebrew Bible, for instance, there are two creation stories: in one, male and female are created together after all other living beings (Genesis 1:26-27); in the other, the man is created first (Genesis 2:7), then the animals (Genesis 2:19) and lastly the woman (Genesis 2:22). In the story of Noah and the flood, it is unclear whether one pair of animals entered the ark, or seven pairs of some kinds of animals but not others (Genesis 6:19-20 and 7:2). Saul commits suicide in one narrative (1 Samuel 31) and is killed by an Amalekite in another (2 Samuel 1). And in the New Testament, there are several, sometimes very different accounts, of the life and ministry of Jesus: a situation sometimes called “the synoptic problem.”

From 1876 to 1884 C.E. a scholar called Julius Wellhausen published his theory to explain some of these repetitions and discrepancies. Wellhausen focused on the Pentateuch and his method is called “The Documentary Hypothesis” (meaning, “the theory of documents”) or the “J-E-D-P theory.” This theory created great shock-

waves and Wellhausen has been compared to a contemporary of his, Charles Darwin, whose ideas also created considerable controversy, as they do even to this day.¹⁵

Basically, Wellhausen argues that the Pentateuch is the product of a long process of weaving together three originally separate literary sources that then underwent a major editing process. The three literary sources are abbreviated as J, E and D. The editing process is abbreviated P. These abbreviations stand for “Yahwist” (in German this word is written with a “J”), “Elohism,” “Deuteronomist” and “Priestly.” What was so shocking about Wellhausen’s theory was that it overturned the traditional idea of the Pentateuch being written by *one* divinely guided man (the prophet Moses), at *one* time (after the escape from Egypt and before entry to the Promised Land: possibly, during the thirteenth century B.C.E.) and in *one* place (in the desert during the years of wandering, possibly on Mt. Sinai). Whilst this traditional idea is still cherished by many believers, Wellhausen’s theory does explain a lot, and versions of it are now widely accepted in biblical scholarship.

Here is a summary of the main features of J, E, D and P, according to Wellhausen:

The J-Source

Wellhausen believes this to be the earliest source underlying the Pentateuch. He dates it to the early monarchy, in the tenth century B.C.E. and believes it originated in the south of Israel, in the land of the tribe of Judah. He calls this source “J” (short for “the Yahwist”), because it uses the name “Yahweh” for the god of Israel. In his native language, German, Yahweh is written with a “J” and in most bibles it is translated “LORD”. J also uses the name “Mt. Sinai” for the holy mountain and describes Yahweh in *anthropomorphic* (i.e. human-like) terms, as talking directly to humans and as walking in the garden (e.g. Genesis 2-3, especially 3:8).

The E-Source

Wellhausen believed that this source originated in the north of Israel about a hundred years after J. It is called “E” (short for “Elohism”), because it uses the name “Elohim” (in most bibles translated “God”) for the god of Israel. E also uses the name “Mt. Horeb” for the holy mountain and describes Elohim in less anthropomorphic terms than J. In texts originally from the E-source, the god of Israel communicates with

¹⁵Charles Darwin published his ideas about the process of natural selection leading to the gradual evolution of species in a famous book called *The Origin of Species*. Most disturbing for many of the people of his time, and even today, was the suggestion that both the ape and the human species evolved from a common ancestor. (Darwin is often but mistakenly accused of saying that humans evolved directly *from* apes.) Many objections to Darwin’s theory come from *creationists*, who defend the idea that God created animals (including apes) and humans as separate species. Nowadays, many believers are creationists, whereas others interpret the scheme of creation in Genesis 1 (of life emerging from water and animal life preceding human life forms) as capturing an early understanding of evolution. Yet other believers accept the idea of a divine creator but have no difficulty in reconciling this with modern scientific ideas. Again, this illustrates how variously the Bible is interpreted.

humans in a less direct way, through dreams or angels (e.g. Genesis 22, where it is an angel who prevents Abraham from following the divine instruction to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice).

The D-Source

Wellhausen associates this source with the later monarchy, especially King Josiah (see 2 Kings 22:3-23:25). It is called “D” (short for “Deuteronomist”), because this source is approximately equivalent to the book called Deuteronomy. This book of the Pentateuch has a distinctive style. It repeats parts of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers and is presented in the form of sermons. D promotes the centralizing of worship of God in one place (compare 2 Kings 23:4 onwards and Deuteronomy 12:1-7) and strongly forbids false worship (compare 2 Kings 23:4-11 and Deuteronomy 16:21-22; 17:3; 18:10-11). D also stresses God’s love for Israel and the necessity for social justice.

The P-Editor

Wellhausen describes P not so much as a literary source but as an editorial process. “P” stands for “Priestly,” because Wellhausen argues for a Priestly group of editors who were active after the exile in Babylon (sometime after 539 B.C.E.). This Priestly group depicts God even more distantly than E: God is very remote and majestic. P is also very much concerned with such themes as purity, order, laws and separation. Wellhausen assigns to P both Genesis 1, which has a lot to say about ordering the world by separating elements (night and day, earth and water, etc.), and the book of Leviticus, which contains many detailed laws, including purity laws (e.g. Leviticus 15).

So, Wellhausen explains the differences between the different depictions of God, for example, by pointing to the one-time existence of separate sources. In one of these sources God is called “Yahweh,” who communicates directly with people; in another, “Elohim,” a more distant deity. Sources, even when different from or in conflict with each other, were combined into what later became the Pentateuch, because all were considered important traditions by later editors, such as the Priestly editors, who sometimes also added their own traditions. In other words, out of respect for different traditions, material was included even if it clashed with other material. According to source criticism, discrepancies, repetitions and inconsistencies are signs of the seams that are inevitable when once-separate materials are woven together.

Form Criticism and Literary Criticism

Like source criticism, *form criticism* breaks up the unity of the biblical text but its methods and aims are very different. Form criticism seeks to establish the forms that make up the biblical text (other words used for “form” are “genre” and the German *Gattung*). You will notice when you read the Bible that there is a whole host of such forms: there are narratives (or stories), lists of names, apocalypses, genealogies, parables, laws, proverbs, hymns, laments, prophetic oracles - to name just a few!

Form criticism recognizes that when we hear or read anything, we decode, or try to understand it, by paying attention to three inter-connected factors: **1. the content**, or *what* is said or written; **2. the form**, or *how* it is said or written; and **3. the setting**, the context in which, or *where* it is said or written. We do this quite automatically. For example, you will read a novel quite differently from a contract you are about to sign; the words “I do” said in the course of a wedding ceremony have a different meaning to the same words “I do” used in answer to the question “do you want more food?”; using bad language in a church is more shocking and inappropriate than it is in the context of a group of friends when your football team is losing.

Form critics look at the different forms in the biblical text and try to establish what the original life settings might have been in which these forms originated and were developed. (Often the German expression for “life setting,” *Sitz im Leben*, is used by biblical scholars.) A psalm of lament, for example, may have originated in the setting of a sad situation, such as the exile in Babylon (e.g. Psalm 137); a *didactic* (i.e. instructional) proverb may have originated in an educational setting, et cetera. Form critics are also interested in exploring the *oral* (i.e. spoken) prehistory of the forms. This means that form critics recognize that some forms probably existed in oral form before they were incorporated into the written text of the Bible. This is probably true of many of the psalms and also of the parables.

We have already seen, with reference to source criticism, that repetition is not uncommon in the Bible. So, there are two creation stories (Genesis 1 and 2-3), two accounts of Moses finding water in the wilderness by striking a rock (Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13) and Deuteronomy repeats much of the material in Exodus-Numbers. There are also repetitions in the gospels: hence, we have two versions of the parable of the lost sheep, for example (Mark 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7). The form critic might account for this in some cases by pointing not to two *separate* source texts (as the source critic might) but to the oral prehistory of the text. This means that a form critic might argue that the parable of the lost sheep circulated in spoken form and was only later incorporated into two separate gospels. Of particular interest to the form critic in this example are the different settings of the parable. In the gospel of Mark, the parable appears in a context where listeners are reminded to care for the “little ones” (probably vulnerable persons, or recent converts): so, here the parable addresses proper behaviour within the Christian community. In the gospel of Luke, however, the parable is set in a context where Jesus, who has been socializing with tax collectors and sinners, is arguing with Pharisees. The parable is followed by other parables: the parable of the lost coin and lost son. The effect of this second setting is that the parable stresses the great worth of even a single sinner who is redeemed.

Literary criticism is not completely unlike form criticism. It, too, is interested in different forms. Literary criticism, however, is focused on the Bible as *literature* or a written text and not, like form criticism, on the oral prehistory or original setting of forms. In a very wide sense, literary criticism is interested in all the questions that arise from the textual nature of the Bible: for example, who wrote it (authorship) and

edited it (redaction)? When and where was it written (historical setting)? What is distinctive about its vocabulary, style and structure, et cetera.?

Literary criticism is often interested in *word patterns* and *literary structuring*. Let us illustrate what we mean by this with concrete examples. With Genesis 1 we notice that this story is carefully constructed and patterned using repeated formulae. Among these are “And God said, ‘Let there be x , and God called the x y . And there was evening and there was morning, the n th day,” with varied items fitting into the place of x , y and n th.¹⁶ This word patterning gives the story a particular rhythm and, as Susan Niditch puts it, creates “the impression of a magisterial and in-charge deity whose word is all powerful, whose creations are firmly rooted, solid, and integrated.”¹⁷ In this way literary structuring contributes to tone and meaning and the literary critic draws our attention to this.

An example of literary structuring is the *acrostic* design of several of the psalms, such as Psalm 119. In an acrostic Psalm each line or verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. So, in Psalm 119, each line in the first verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; each line in the second verse, with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet; each line in the third verse, with the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet, et cetera. Again, drawing attention to this careful literary structure draws attention to the artistry, discipline and sophistication of the psalm.

Narrative structuring, or the putting together of a story, is also a topic for the literary critic. Let us take a look at the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Imagine if Jesus had told the story like this, in answer to the question of how to be a good neighbour: “One day a man fell into the hands of robbers. They took his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. Then along came a Samaritan, who bandaged his wounds and took him to an innkeeper, leaving him money to nurse the man’s wounds. Go and do likewise.” What a dull story by comparison with the one in Luke’s gospel! In Luke’s gospel a priest comes along first. He sees the battered man and passes by on the other side of the street. Next, a Levite comes along and also passes by. Both the priest and the Levite are members of the Jewish elite - surely we would have expected them to do the right thing, but they don’t. Finally, a Samaritan comes along and does what is right. The effect of having two people pass by is to heighten anticipation and build up to the *climax* of the Samaritan who behaves like a good neighbour should. Again, a literary critic draws attention to such matters of structure.

Historical Criticism and Social-Scientific Criticism

There are two kinds of historical criticism of the Bible.¹⁸ The first looks at history narrated in the text of the Bible. Some biblical books, like Genesis through to 2 Kings,

¹⁶See Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 13.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸See John H. Hayes, and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*, 45-58.

the two books of Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, the four Gospels and Acts, describe *history* (i.e. important events in chronological order). While we cannot be sure that these books are totally historically accurate, they do provide something of a window for looking into times past. Some figures described in these texts, moreover, such as King Jehoiachin, who was taken into exile in Babylon, and Pontius Pilate, Roman governor at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, are mentioned in other external sources.

Historical criticism reads the texts of the Bible to try to learn more about the period of time they depict. To do this well, a historical critic also consults other ancient texts that are not in the Bible. Reading the creation stories and the flood story of Genesis, for example, alongside stories from Babylon reveals interesting similarities and differences. Babylon (located in today's Iraq) had an ancient civilization with its own flourishing religious and literary traditions. Babylon also exerted a lot of influence on Israel and for a time colonized it (597-539 B.C.E.). Babylon's creation story describes how the great god Marduk fought a mighty battle against a sea-monster called Tiamat. After defeating Tiamat, Marduk made the world from her dead body. Although there is no sea-monster in Genesis 1, where God creates the world in a peaceful and orderly fashion, there are traditions elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible that describe the god of Israel as a deity who defeats a mighty monster called Rahab, Behemoth, or Leviathan (Isaiah 27:1 and 51:9; Job 26:12-13, 40:15-24 and 41:1-34; Psalms 74:14 and 89:10).¹⁹ Another example is the Babylonian story of a hero of ancient time called Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim was told of a great flood and instructed to build a vessel and bring on board his family and animals, so that they might survive the flood. This story is very similar to that of Noah and the flood in Genesis 6-8.²⁰ The historical critic uses this information to try and establish whether Babylonian and Israelite stories had a common origin, or whether one influenced the other.

Another useful tool for the historical critic is *archaeology*. Archaeology is the study of ancient artefacts. Many of these lay buried in the ground and have been uncovered in excavations. Archaeology provides historical critics with datable material that in some cases supports and in other cases undermines the biblical text. An archaeological excavation at a place called Tel Dan in Israel has, for example, unearthed an ancient inscription that includes the phrase "the house of David."²¹ This inscription, which has been dated to about a century *after* King David is believed to have lived, seems to confirm that David was the founder of a dynasty ("house" is a common ancient near Eastern term for "dynasty") and that his fame and influence was enduring

¹⁹For a full discussion of the idea that the Genesis 1 story is strongly influenced by the Babylonian creation story, see Hermann Gunkel, "The Influence of Babylonian Mythology Upon the Biblical Creation Story," in *Creation in the Old Testament* (Issues in Religion and Theology 6) ed. Bernard W. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 25-52.

²⁰You can find the Babylonian stories in *The Ancient Near East Volume I: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958).

²¹For a fuller discussion see Steven L. McKenzie, "Was There a King David?" in his book *King David: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9-24.

enough for him to be mentioned even a century after his death. This is an example of archaeology confirming the existence and importance of King David and, thereby, confirming an element of the biblical text about him.

Where the conquest of the land by Joshua is concerned, however, archaeology conflicts with the biblical text. The book of Joshua describes its hero of the same name taking the “Promised Land” very quickly in a series of successful military attacks. But archaeological excavations have revealed no evidence for such a rapid and large-scale conquest. Archaeologists would expect signs of destruction in the layer of earth corresponding to the time of Joshua, such as evidence of burned-out villages and the appearance of new styles of pottery and weapons introduced by the conquerors. But none of this has been unearthed. So, in this case archaeology resists the biblical text. As a consequence, many historical critics now think that the book of Joshua is exaggerated or historically untrue. Instead they favour the idea that *either* the Israelites entered the land gradually and peacefully and became integrated with the indigenous population, *or* that the Israelites did not come from elsewhere but emerged from within Canaan.²²

The second kind of historical criticism focuses not on the history *in* the text, like the method we have just described, but, instead, on the history *of* the text. The text of the Bible has its own history and some historical critics investigate “how, why, when, where, and in what circumstances it originated; by whom and for whom it was written, composed, edited, produced, and preserved.”²³ Source criticism is a specialized kind of this type of historical criticism, because it attempts to explain the formation of the Pentateuch through the combination of separate sources, by multiple authors, over a long period of time.

This second kind of historical critic should be a good textual critic, because thorough knowledge of the text and textual variants can yield clues to its history. The book of Job, for example, contains a lot of vocabulary that is not contained in any other books of the Hebrew Bible. Among this vocabulary are a lot of *hapax legomena* (i.e. words which appear only once in a body of literature). This might suggest that at least some portions of Job are very ancient and contain *antiquated* (i.e. very old, out-of-date) words that in later times ceased to be used, or it might suggest that Job originated in a different region from other books of the Hebrew Bible where a different regional Hebrew was used.

Historical critics examining the history *of* the text cannot simply believe exactly what the text itself claims. For example, they cannot assume that Moses wrote the Pentateuch just because tradition purports this to be the case. Where the book of Isaiah is concerned, for example, the majority of scholars now believe that this long book was *not* the work of just one author, the prophet Isaiah, but written in at least

²²For a summary of the various ways in which scholars explain or challenge Joshua’s conquest, see David W. Cotter, “The Israelite Conquest of Canaan,” *The Bible Today* 39/4 (July 2001): 204-09.

²³John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*, 45.

three separate historical periods by multiple authors. The book of Isaiah is, therefore, divided into First Isaiah (chapters 1-39); Second (or Deutero) Isaiah (chapters 40-55) and Third (or Trito) Isaiah (chapters 56-66). Also, most scholars do not believe that the book of Daniel was written by the wise man Daniel who is described as having lived in Babylon during the exile in the sixth century B.C.E. Instead, the book of Daniel is widely believed to be the latest of the Hebrew Bible books, because parts of it suggest and reflect the background of persecution by the Greek king Antiochus IV in the second century B.C.E.²⁴

One reason why authorship of books of the Bible is difficult to establish is because it was once a convention to attribute texts to famous people - even if they did not really write these texts. Instead, the name attached to a text was often not that of the actual author but a *pseudonym* (i.e. a false name). Attributing the authorship of the Song of Songs and book of Ecclesiastes to someone as famous as King Solomon, or attributing all the writings in the book of Isaiah to the prophet Isaiah, gave these texts more authority. People of antiquity probably knew that the attribution was not literally true. There is a whole literature of non-canonical texts with titles like "The Testament of Abraham" or "The Apocalypse of Moses" called *pseudepigraphical literature* (i.e. literature written under a pseudonym). This shows us clearly that the work of the historical critic is not always as straight-forward as it may seem.²⁵

Social-scientific criticism of the Bible uses some of the methods of academic disciplines outside of biblical studies. These disciplines are sociology and cultural anthropology, which can be grouped together under the label "social sciences."²⁶ Sociology is the study of the development, nature and laws of human society. Sociologists tend to examine their own, usually western, modern, industrial, urban societies. Cultural anthropologists, on the other hand, usually travel to human societies foreign to them, which tend to be small-scale and hunter-gatherer, or rural. Both sociologists and anthropologists use *empirical data* (i.e. data based on direct observation and experiment), as is typical of the sciences. Sociologists tend to use more statistical data, whereas cultural anthropologists tend to conduct field work. Field work refers to the observation of a human society and the recording of interactions and practices. Cultural anthropologists often learn the language of the society they are studying but they try not to become totally integrated into that society, in the interests of objectivity.

²⁴The story of Antiochus IV's persecutions is contained in a collection of writings called either the Apocrypha or the deutero-canonical books. The Jewish and Protestant canons do not include this collection of texts but the Catholic and Orthodox Christian canons do. You can find the story in 1 Maccabees 1-4.

²⁵Source critics point out that Moses is unlikely to have written all (even any) of the Pentateuch. How could he have written about his own death for instance (Deuteronomy 34)? It is also improbable that the prophet Samuel wrote books 1 and 2 of Samuel; after all, Samuel dies in 1 Samuel 25.

²⁶For a good introduction to the subject see David J. Chalcroft, ed., *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism: A Sheffield Reader* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 13-19.

Like sociologists and cultural anthropologists, social-scientific critics of the Bible try to understand the human interactions and social structures in the background of the biblical text. Whilst they cannot, of course, travel back in time and conduct field work, they often use findings and models from the social sciences to gain a richer understanding of the world in which texts from the Bible were written, read and used. Instead of doing field work they look for clues in the text to tell them something about the people who produced that text.²⁷

For example, in the story about David's adultery with Bathsheba, we read early on that David sees Bathsheba bathing and becomes attracted to her. He asks who the woman is and is told "She is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite" (2 Samuel 11:3). Notice how Bathsheba is described: first by name and then in relation to her father and her husband. Actually, this is typical of the Hebrew Bible: women are most often defined in relation to men - usually, their fathers, husband or sons. Women are protected by their fathers until marriage, at which time they become the property of their husbands. After this, their status is enhanced through the birth of sons. The fate of a childless widow is depicted as utterly desolate and vulnerable. What this indicates about the society in which these texts were composed and distributed is that the society was most probably *patriarchal*. This means that the society was one in which men tended to wield considerably more power and authority than women. Women, meanwhile, derived status secondarily, from or through men. Other aspects of the Bible also confirm this evaluation.

Social-scientific criticism, when it leads to a fuller understanding of the social structures or conflicts behind the biblical text, can enhance our understanding of the Bible. Let us return to the parable of the Good Samaritan: who are the Samaritans?

²⁷Cultural anthropologists have been criticized for their lack of real understanding of the societies they observe and write about: how likely is it that someone who has lived and been acculturated and educated in a western-world country can truly understand the very different complexities of a traditional society on the continent of Africa? Also, how well can such findings from cultural anthropology then be projected on to the Bible? One article exploring this situation is David Fiensy's "Using the Nuer Culture of Africa in Understanding the Old Testament: An Evaluation," *JSOT* 38 (1987): 73-83. Fortunately, field work in Africa, for instance, is now more and more often conducted by African anthropologists who are not only more likely to have a better understanding of the society they are investigating but also to inspire greater trust in the people they are interviewing and studying.

The Samaritans were originally a Jewish group associated with the northern kingdom²⁸ who over time developed their own religious traditions²⁹ and came, increasingly, to be despised by those Jews who centred their worship on the temple in Jerusalem.³⁰ If you look carefully at the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42) you will see that the Samaritans were discriminated against by Jews: the Samaritan woman is surprised when Jesus asks her for water, because Jews did not associate with Samaritans (John 4:9).

So, now that we know that in the Jewish society of Jesus' day Samaritans were considered lesser people, how does that affect the story of the Good Samaritan? First, let us remember the other two people who see the beaten man: the first is a priest and the second a Levite. Again, social-scientific examination of priests and Levites in the Bible will teach us that both of these are high-status, privileged individuals. Priests in Israel were men from a social elite who officiated in Jerusalem's temple. Not everyone could become a priest: priests in Israel had to come from a special family, traditionally from the descendants of Aaron, Moses' brother, who was the first high priest. Levites, on the other hand, are descendants of the holy tribe of Levi. Some Levites (those in Aaron's direct line) were priests; other male members of this tribe, however, could also perform some holy duties from which members of the other tribes were barred. Both the priest and the Levite walk past the injured man and offer no help. Given that both are holy people with great social privileges, we might have expected them of all people to do what is right, but they don't. Then along comes a Samaritan, a member of a despised group. The listeners of Jesus' time would have been surprised that *he* of all

²⁸During the rule of Israel's first three kings (Saul, David and Solomon) the monarchy is, in the Hebrew Bible, depicted as united: one king ruled the whole territory. After the death of Solomon, however, in about 922 B.C.E., the kingdom was divided into a northern and a southern kingdom. The temple in Jerusalem was in the smaller southern kingdom and, generally-speaking, the Hebrew Bible depicts the southern kingdom as more favoured by God than the northern kingdom. The northern kingdom, depicted as more wicked, was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. After this its people became scattered and inter-married with other nations. As the religion of the Israelites increasingly condemned inter-marriage with foreigners (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah) the people associated with the northern kingdom, among them the Samaritans, came to be regarded by southern Israelites as defiled.

²⁹The Samaritans had their own temple on their own holy mountain, called Mt. Gerizim. This temple was destroyed by the Jewish leader John Hyrcanus in 129/8 B.C.E., indicating the enmity between Samaritans and other Jews. The Samaritans also considered only their version of the Pentateuch (not the other books of the Hebrew Bible) to be canonical. To this day there exists a small Samaritan community in Israel.

³⁰There was a temple for the god of Israel in Jerusalem from the time of Solomon (the tenth century B.C.E.) until it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. The temple was rebuilt after the exile in Babylon came to an end and dedicated in 516 B.C.E. It was destroyed for the second time by the Romans, in 70 C.E. The Jewish temple has not been rebuilt. When there was a temple in Jerusalem it was the most important place of worship: here the priests officiated, sacrifices were offered up and people assembled on feast days. After the temple was destroyed worship changed and became more focused on canon.

the three men would be the one to do what is right. But in Jesus' parable it is the Good Samaritan who loves his neighbour. If we don't know about these social dimensions of Jesus' society, and how Samaritans were regarded by many Jews, we miss a lot in the story. Social-scientific criticism helps us with acquiring this knowledge.

Feminist and Womanist Criticism

A feminist critical reading of the Bible is a political way of reading. Feminists can be either men or women. Feminists recognize wide-spread women's inequality - in political, economic and social terms, for example - and strive to draw attention to and change this situation. Feminism has been a powerful force, particularly since the women's movement of the 1960s. This movement was, in its most visible forms, centred in the United States and Western Europe.

With regard to biblical criticism, feminist criticism tends to belong to one of two types. The first type is what we might call *negative feminist criticism*. This kind of criticism notes how frequently women are ignored, marginalized or oppressed in and by biblical texts. It is noticeable, taking the Bible as a whole, that narrative focus and attention is more often on male characters than on female characters. Also, accounts in the Bible tend to be filtered through men's perspectives, again putting men in the foreground. Another way to put this is to say that the texts are *androcentric* (i.e. male-centred), while women are sometimes little more than "not men" or "other." Where marginalization is concerned, we have already seen that women are often defined not on their own terms or according to their own qualities but in terms of the men to whom they are related.

The oppression of women in or by biblical texts is even more serious and disturbing than the marginalization. A negative feminist critic might point to the story of the Levite's concubine in the book of Judges 19 to illustrate this. Here an unnamed concubine is taken from her father's home by her Levite husband. As they journey towards the Levite's home, the Levite talks to his servant about where to stay the night - he does not talk to his concubine and none of her words are recorded in the text (i.e. marginalization). They end up staying at the home of an old man in Gibeah. In the night this home is surrounded by brutish men. The men demand that the old man should give them the Levite, because they want to abuse him sexually. The old man refuses and offers them instead his virgin daughter and the concubine. The men do not accept the offer. Eventually, the Levite pushes his concubine outside. The men of Gibeah rape and abuse her all night. The next morning the Levite finds the concubine at the door to the house and tells her to get up. When she does not rise, he puts her on the back of a donkey, takes her home, cuts her body into pieces and sends a body-part to each tribe to stir up a war of revenge.

This story is horrifying to women on a number of levels. First of all, the concubine is almost entirely passive. She is taken back by her husband without us ever hearing her opinion or consent; like the only other woman character (the old man's virgin daughter) she has no voice; she is pushed outside by her husband, who saves his own skin, and is terribly abused; even her corpse is denied a decent burial. We see in this

story how women (the concubine and the virgin daughter) are offered up (admittedly in threatening circumstances) to save men and we see that this is done without any comment that this is shocking: the text has no word of criticism for the Levite or the old man. A story like this has rightly been called *gyno-sadistic* (i.e. cruel to women)³¹ and it has been feminist critics who have been most vocal in pointing this out, as a first step to demanding justice for women.

The second type of feminist criticism can be characterized as *positive feminist criticism*. This criticism looks at the biblical text, not with the purpose of revealing how it damages women, but with the purpose of finding liberating readings and positive role-models for women. Feminist critics of this positive type might focus, for example, on positive female³² imagery in the biblical text. They point out for example that when God created humankind in his image (Genesis 1:27) he created them male and female, suggesting perhaps that God combines male and female characteristics. They also point out that Eve in Genesis 2-3 is not actually depicted negatively. She is a woman who desires knowledge; she takes the initiative and takes the fruit; she does not deceive the man: he is with her and presumably makes his own choice to eat from the tree. Although God punishes the woman with pain in childbirth, she is not cursed and she is given a name that means "living" - a name that associates her with the life-giving power of God himself. In fact, the notion that Eve is "easily deceived," "a temptress" and "cursed" is more a creation of later interpretation than of the text in Genesis itself! Again, it was feminist critics who were in the forefront of pointing this out, thereby liberating Eve and making her a more positive image of womankind.³³ Another text to mention here is the book of Ruth. Unusually, two women, Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, are the main characters of this text. These women are courageous, take initiative and help to shape their destiny. Again, this well suits the purposes of positive feminist criticism.

Womanist criticism emerged from feminist criticism and has been steadily gaining prominence since the 1990s. Womanist criticism is, like feminist criticism, concerned with women's rights and experiences. Added to this, however, is a racial dimension, because womanist critics are feminist scholars of colour. Because feminist criticism grew out of the women's movement in the west and because feminist criticism was concentrated above all in western universities, it was dominated by educated, white,

³¹For a very good series of examples explaining how Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21), David's raped daughter Tamar (2 Samuel 13), the Levite's concubine (Judges 19) and Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11) have been wronged in and by textual depiction, see Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

³²Be careful with these three similar-sounding words: *female* (meaning a biological category: a person is born male or female); *feminine* (meaning the opposite of masculine and referring to what a society considers appropriate for a female; e.g. a delicate build and a nurturing and/or submissive character are considered feminine in many societies) and *feminist* (a political designation, referring to a desire for women's equality with men).

³³For a full feminist exposition of Genesis 2-3, see "A Love Story Gone Awry," by Phyllis Trible, in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 72-143.

middle-class women. As women and men of colour began more and more to add their voices to academic discussion, it became increasingly clear to feminists of colour that feminism was often lacking in sensitivity to matters of race, colour and racial discrimination. At the same time, the work of male scholars of colour (who were often but by no means exclusively drawn to postcolonial criticism and liberation theology, see below) often lacked sensitivity to matters of discrimination on the grounds of *gender* (i.e. the state of being male or female). Womanist criticism addresses *both* forms of discrimination: on the basis of gender and of colour. Like feminist critics, womanist critics have exposed gaps in biblical scholarship because they, usually as the result of personal experience, have the necessary sensitivity to a number of individuals and situations in the biblical text. Womanist critics have, for instance, drawn attention to Abraham's secondary wife Hagar who was an Egyptian and therefore probably a woman of colour. They have examined the treatment Hagar suffers at the hands of Sarah, her mistress, but have also pointed out the fact that she is honoured by receiving a *theophany* (i.e. vision of the divine) (Genesis 16:7-14). Again, therefore, like feminist critics, womanist critics expose both negative aspects, damaging to women of colour (e.g. Hagar's oppression at Sarah's hands) and positive aspects, elevating women of colour (e.g. Hagar's theophany).

While womanism began as an empowering assertion of African American women in the United States,³⁴ it also reached out to women of colour throughout the world. Nowadays womanism is an international phenomenon and black women writers on the African continent have also developed distinctive voices of womanist biblical interpretation.³⁵ Often, personal experience motivates the womanist interpreter. This is very clear, for instance, in the following excerpt, from an article by the South African scholar Jacqueline Williams:

When I read Numbers 12:1-16 for the first time, I began to develop a fascination with the Cushite woman. This fascination is linked to the fact that this woman was a black African. ... I have approached this text, because of the marginalisation of the Cushite woman in this community. I am making her central to this text even though she is completely marginalised in the text as it is. I am taking my own intuition and experience (as an oppressed black African woman) of the text as more important than my engagement with mainstream scholarship's interpretations of the text. It is my contention that my own experience of having been marginalised, because of my

³⁴One of the foremost womanists in the United States is Renita Weems. Her book *Just A Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego, California: LuraMedia, 1988) focuses on such women as Hagar, Moses' Cushite wife and Vashti (from the book of Esther).

³⁵One example of this is South African woman scholar Madipoane Masenya's Bosadi (Womanhood) method of interpretation. For an illustration, see her article, "...but you shall let every girl live': Reading Exodus 1:1-2:10 the Bosadi (Womanhood) Way," *Old Testament Essays* 15/1 (2002): 99-112.

black Africanness will enable me to question the text from a different vantagepoint than that from main stream scholarship.³⁶

In this instance, the womanist approach is distinctly subjective and, alongside the biblical text, also focuses on the interpreter of the text.

Liberation Theology and Postcolonial Criticism

Like womanism, liberation theology and postcolonial criticism have proven to be appealing to scholars on the continent of Africa. *Liberation theology* did *not* originate in one of the dominant centres of biblical scholarship, Western Europe or the United States. Instead, this method of biblical criticism emerged in Latin America and the name “liberation theology” was first used by its best-known proponent, Gustavo Gutierrez, a Roman Catholic priest from Peru.³⁷ Like feminism and womanism, liberation theology has a political aim. The agenda of feminism is to seek equality between men and women, while the agenda of womanism additionally addresses the particular injustices confronting women of colour. Liberation theology is generated by persons of faith (the Christian faith in this case) and is not secular.³⁸ Its agenda is political in the sense that it seeks justice for those in the world suffering from poverty and oppression. Liberation theologians seek to achieve social justice. In the course of this they use the Bible to work towards this goal.

³⁶Jacqueline Williams, ““And she became “Snow White””: Numbers 12:1-16,” *Old Testament Essays* 15/1 (2002): 259-68, 259-60.

³⁷His most famous book is *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973).

³⁸Feminist criticism of the Bible can be either theological or secular (see the introduction and note 7 above). Womanism in the United States is very often theological. This is clear in Renita Weems’ *Just A Sister Away*, for instance. One reason for this is that the majority of African Americans (and most United States womanists *are* African Americans) are practising Christians. This is true also of most African woman biblical scholars. It is important to note, however, that African biblical scholars also often acknowledge the influence and importance of African traditional religions, as well as the fact that missionary activity often went hand-in-hand with the destructive and exploitative forces of colonialism. This is evident in Musa Dube Shomanah’s (now Musa W. Dube) “An African Woman Reflects: The Five Husbands at the Well of Living Waters” in *A Decade of Solidarity with the Bible: Decade Festival: Visions Beyond 1998*, eds. Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998), 6-27. Furthermore, as Tinyiko S. Maluleke puts it forcefully, “What we need now in South Africa is not simply more Christian theology; Apartheid *was* Christian theology” (see his “Dealing Lightly with the Wound of My People? The TRC Process in Theological Perspective,” *Missionalia* 25/3 (1997): 324-43, p.338). Apartheid, literally meaning “separation,” refers to the infamous policy of institutionalized racism that discriminated particularly against the black majority in South Africa. The enactment of apartheid laws began in 1948 and persisted until the first free election in 1994.

The most popular biblical motifs in liberation theology are, first, the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, known as the exodus (see Exodus 12-14);³⁹ and secondly, the life and death of Jesus, especially Jesus' solidarity with and struggle for the poor and outcast of society. For liberation theologians, Jesus' concern for the disadvantaged and marginalized is interpreted as living proof that God is not indifferent to social evils but reveals himself through, and is on the side of, the poor and oppressed. Liberation theology emerged in Latin America because this part of the world has been marked and scarred by political instability, violence, poverty and other forms of social injustice. From here it has spread to many other communities around the world where similar inequalities and attendant desires for liberation exist. Consequently, liberation theology is practised in many parts of Africa⁴⁰ and Asia,⁴¹ as well as by Hispanic Americans in the United States.

Postcolonial criticism, like womanism, has been a vocal presence in biblical studies since about the 1990s. It is the voice of the marginalised, rather than of the dominant majority, mostly represented by white, educated, western males to the exclusion of other voices. Postcolonial criticism is associated with political independence, or the

³⁹In the context of southern Africa this motif is a little ambiguous. Both the white Boers of South Africa and the black Africans whom they oppressed identified with the Hebrews of the exodus: black Africans because, like the Hebrews, they were engaged in a long, violent struggle for liberation against oppression; Boers, because they perceived themselves as, like the Hebrews, a chosen people laying claim to a divinely promised land.

⁴⁰Contextual Bible Study of South Africa, as practised by Gerald O. West and other socially engaged biblical scholars, is a kind of liberation theology adapted for the context of a people suffering from the repercussions of apartheid (see note 38 above). This type of bible study engages poor and marginalized South Africans and aims at making biblical texts relevant to them and then using these to facilitate healing. Community-based readings of 2 Samuel 13:1-22 (the story of the rape of Tamar), for instance, are used to address rape in South Africa itself. The purpose of this is to validate the suffering of South Africans, in particular *the most vulnerable* South Africans (historically, poor, black women) but also to change the circumstances that have brought about suffering (in this case, to find ways to confront, punish and eradicate rape). The identification with society's oppressed and the political agenda of striving for change are both characteristic of liberation theology.

⁴¹An Indian variant of liberation theology is *dalit theology*, which focuses especially on justice for the oppressed dalits, who are also called "untouchables." According to the traditional Hindu caste system Indian society is divided into many *castes* (i.e. social divisions). The major castes are Brahmins (priests and philosophers), Kshatriyas (the nobility), Vaishyas (farmers and merchants) and Shudras (manual labourers). Those outside of this system (or, outcastes), who are lowest in the social order, are called dalits. In Hindu tradition, the lowliest of chores fall to the dalits. Dalits also tend to be the poorest, most underprivileged and oppressed. Some Christian Indians resist and seek to change this situation, which is strongly reminiscent of liberation theology (see K. P. Kuruvila, *The Word Became Flesh: A Christological Paradigm for Doing Theology in India*. (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002) and Moses Swamidass, *Conversion and Reconversion in India: A Study of the Experience of Dalit Christians in the Context of Ministry of the Bible Faith Mission*. (Mt. Sinai, Kerala: Bible Faith Mission, 2001).

liberation from colonial rule, which, in the case of many African nations, was not achieved until relatively recently.

The seeds of postcolonial criticism were sown by Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which was published in French as early as 1961. This ground-breaking book voiced what can be called "cultural resistance" to France's colonial rule of Africans. Fanon (who is from Martinique)⁴² argues that colonized people like himself need to find a voice and an identity by reclaiming their own distinctive past. He points out that colonized people have been gravely damaged by European colonizers' power to define what is best, thereby devaluing the history and traditions of the colonized. He draws attention to the tendency of white European colonizers to depict the history of colonized regions as starting with colonization and as "uncivilized" prior to it. Also, there is a tendency to demean colonized people as "primitive," "other" and "inferior." Fanon recognizes how damaging this is and that healing can only begin when first, the past is reclaimed and secondly, the damaging colonialist ideology by which the past has been distorted and devalued is eroded.⁴³

Peter Barry points to a helpful three-stage model to explain how postcolonial criticism has developed.⁴⁴ He summarizes this as "adopt-adapt-adept." We will apply it particularly to the African context. In the first stage colonized subjects *adopt* the European model in a relatively unquestioning way, accepting it as authoritative. One example would be the adoption by African writers of the novel. In the second stage, however, the European form is changed, or *adapted* to African subject matter. In the third stage of postcolonial criticism the European form is transformed substantially, even beyond recognition: this is the "*adept*" stage.

Where postcolonial criticism of the Bible is concerned, traces of these three stages and of creativity and distinctive African-ness can be clearly observed. Two African biblical scholars who demonstrate this amply with reference to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well are Teresa Okure, from Nigeria and Musa Dube, from Botswana.⁴⁵ Let us look more closely at Dube's postcolonial reading of John 4. What we find when we read her article is that Dube has *adopted* the text

⁴²Martinique is an island in the Caribbean Sea. The French arrived here in 1653, virtually eradicated the indigenous population and imported slaves from Africa. Slavery did not end until 1848. The population of Martinique now is 90% African/African-white-Indian. The island is not independent but an "overseas department of France." The official languages of Martinique are French and a distinctive dialect called Creole patois.

⁴³There are other important early texts on this subject. One writer who must be mentioned here is Edward Said, whose important book *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) focuses particularly on the damaging consequences of interpretations from the West that distort and demean the East.

⁴⁴See Peter Barry, "Postcolonial criticism," in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 192-202.

⁴⁵Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1988) and Musa Dube Shomanah, "An African Woman Reflects."

from the New Testament,⁴⁶ as well as the convention of some western biblical scholars to interpret the Samaritan woman's five past husbands and the man now who is not her true husband (see John 4:18) in symbolic terms as referring to the powers that colonized Samaria.⁴⁷ But Dube has also *adapted* the pre-existing text and convention to make it particularly relevant for the context of southern Africa, roughly equivalent to today's Zimbabwe. She does this by telling a story of successive African women who encounter dominating forces: namely, Mzilikazi, David Livingstone, Cecil John Rhodes, Ian Smith, Canaan Banana and Globalization. Finally, Dube's reinterpretation is also *adept* in that she incorporates features that are completely African and not at all derived from the dominant western-centric biblical critical models. Examples of this are the songs which begin and conclude the article and the passages in African languages, which are left un-translated. The effect of this is that Dube has laid claim to an African-centred reading of the text. She has reclaimed African identity and put it firmly in the foreground while at the same time minimizing western-centred norms. In all of these ways her article is distinctly postcolonial. It is also a refreshing and innovative interpretation that casts new light on an ancient text.

New Ways of Reading: HIV & AIDS-Sensitive Readings

Another method of reading which is gaining increasing prominence in Africa does not, as yet, have a formal name. One way to describe this method is as HIV/AIDS-sensitive reading of the Bible. It has arisen because HIV (the Human Immunodeficiency Virus), which according to most reliable medical research leads to AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), has devastated the continent of Africa,

⁴⁶It is certainly true, as many African biblical scholars are tired of pointing out, that the Bible was shaped more by Africa than by Europe - although for a time Europeans did come close to monopolizing it. There were indeed Christian communities in Africa before there were any in England or Germany, for instance. Christian missionary activity, particularly from the nineteenth century onwards, did, however, bring the Bible to parts of Africa where it was not previously known. When it was brought, it was brought in the language of the missionaries and only subsequently translated into African languages. As Dube points out, this second wave of the Bible's impact on Africa was often attended by other forms of cultural colonization, including exploitative economic ones.

⁴⁷It would have been most uncommon for a woman in first century C.E. Israel to have had six husbands. Indeed, it is even today. As Dube points out, Samaria (the northern region of Israel) was colonized in turn by Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and the Maccabeans. The reference to five husbands may well refer to these five colonial powers. Jesus lived in the days of Roman occupation (or colonization), so Rome would be the sixth "husband."

in particular the sub-Saharan portion, more than any other part of the world.⁴⁸ While the symptoms of HIV can often be controlled for many years with a combination of drugs, there is as yet no cure for the virus. AIDS is a fatal disease and if HIV infection is not diagnosed and not treated the illness causes much misery. Such a situation is more likely when a person's diet is poor and there is exposure to other infections and diseases, conditions most common among the poverty-stricken, who are more likely to lack economic resources, access to medical care and education. The statistics of HIV/AIDS casualties on the continent of Africa are staggering.⁴⁹ Not only are millions of Africans ailing, suffering and dying, leaving behind orphans and decimating communities, HIV/AIDS is draining resources, energies and hopes.

As the HIV/AIDS pandemic is so pervasive in many parts of Africa, it has also influenced interpretations of biblical texts.⁵⁰ Generally, these interpretations do *not* argue that HIV/AIDS is a punishment from God for sin (a claim sometimes made from church pulpits). Instead, they offer compassion and comfort for those suffering

⁴⁸HIV and AIDS were first identified and researched in the west. Both began to enter public consciousness in the early 1980s. To begin with, the majority of HIV/AIDS diagnoses in the United States were clustered among certain ethnic minorities (e.g. Puerto Ricans), persons who had received blood transfusions (in particular haemophiliacs), drug addicts, and the male *homosexual* (i.e. sexually attracted to someone of the same biological sex) community. While the number of HIV infections in both west Europe and the United States is on the decline where these groups are concerned, it is now rising among *heterosexuals* (i.e. those sexually attracted to someone of the opposite biological sex, i.e. male to female or female to male). In Eastern Europe, as well as in India, HIV/AIDS is alarmingly on the rise.

⁴⁹ According to statistics estimates published by UNAIDS, at the end of 2008, 22.4 million adults and children were living with HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa., 1.4 million were believed to have died and an estimated 14.1 million children were left orphaned as a direct consequence of HIV-related illnesses.

⁵⁰HIV/AIDS-sensitive readings also appear in western biblical criticism; most notably, as a sub-category of *lesbian/gay criticism* (sometimes also *queerist criticism*), which incorporates the voices of yet another marginal group: the homosexual community. (The reason for the name is that females sexually attracted to other females are called "lesbians," while both females and males attracted to members of the same biological sex are sometimes called "gay" or "queer.") The male homosexual community in the United States in particular has suffered a large number of casualties from HIV/AIDS. One example of an HIV/AIDS-sensitive reading from the United States by a homosexual male is Jim Mitulski's "Ezekiel Understands AIDS, AIDS Understands Ezekiel: Or Reading the Bible with HIV" in Robert E. Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000), 153-60. In Africa, HIV is mostly transmitted through heterosexual contact. The attitude to homosexuality, meanwhile, is often considerably less accepting than it is in large parts of United States and western European society. It is true that the constitution of South Africa protects its citizens' rights in terms of their sexual orientation whatever it be - heterosexual, homosexual, or *bisexual* (i.e. someone sexually attracted to both males and females) - but in several other African countries homosexuality is illegal (e.g. Namibia and Botswana). HIV/AIDS-sensitive readings from African contexts are not commonly from a lesbian/gay critical perspective.

from HIV/AIDS and speak of spiritual healing where a cure for the disease remains elusive. Such readings are now represented in a number of publications. The South African journal *Missionalia* devoted an entire edition to HIV/AIDS-sensitive readings, which included many interpretations of biblical texts.⁵¹ Further examples reflecting the growing prominence of this new kind of exegesis include a conference entitled “Sex, Stigma and HIV/AIDS: African Women Challenging Religion, Culture and Social Practices” hosted by The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, held in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) in August 2002; as well as publications such as *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes* and *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*, to name but two of a growing number.

What this new phenomenon of HIV/AIDS-sensitive readings of the Bible shows is that biblical criticism is dynamic, changing with and addressing circumstances as they arise.

Conclusion

Our analysis of biblical interpretation and methods has, necessarily, been incomplete and selective. The subject is simply too vast and complicated to fit into one chapter. We have, however, illustrated two important tendencies. First of all, biblical criticism was once almost entirely the preserve of university-educated, white, western males. Moreover, most of these interpreters were Christians. Nowadays, many more voices, once absent or marginalized, have actively joined in the interpretation of biblical texts. Among these voices are those of people who are from other religious traditions, or none at all (i.e. secular readers/readers from the religious studies rather than theology perspective), as well as woman interpreters, black interpreters, interpreters from non-western nations, homosexual interpreters, interpreters with HIV/AIDS or with experience of HIV/AIDS - to name just a few! Biblical criticism is now a more varied and vibrant discipline and voices from Africa add considerably to this diversity.

Another development in biblical interpretation, which has met with more criticism than the one just described, is a shift towards subjectivity. If we look at some of the earlier methods of criticism in our diachronic overview (textual, source, form, historical, literary, social-scientific and some feminist criticisms), we notice that the primary emphasis in all of them is on the *text* of the Bible. Sometime in the 1970s and gathering momentum in the 1990s in particular, we see quite different varieties coming to the fore. Womanist, postcolonial, HIV/AIDS-sensitive and lesbian/gay criticisms all share in common an increased emphasis on the *interpreter* of the text. There is now a much greater acknowledgment that *who* reads the text has an impact on the interpretation of that text. The Bible may be a collection of ancient texts but biblical criticism is ever new and renewing.

⁵¹*Missionalia* 29/2 (August 2001).

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CHAPTER TWO

An Overview of the Old Testament

Lovemore Togarasei

Introduction

The first part of the Bible is known by Christians as the Old Testament (OT). Jews, however, are not comfortable with this description since the New Testament is not very important to them. The appropriate description of the OT for Jews is the Hebrew Bible. Throughout this chapter I therefore use OT and Hebrew Bible interchangeably. The OT is sometimes referred to as the *Tanak*, an acronym derived from the initial consonants of the Hebrew Bible's three main divisions: the *Torah* (Law), the *Nebiim* (Prophets) and the *Kethubim* (Writings). Though the three divisions are appropriate for Jews, Christians and Christian scholars identify four sections of the Hebrew Bible. These are the Law, History, the Writings and the Prophets. This chapter is an overview of the Hebrew Bible. It is divided into seven sections. The first section gives the geographical, historical, cultural and religious background of the books of the Old Testament. The second section looks at the origins of the Hebrew Bible canon. The third section is a survey of the main themes in the books of Law. The fourth section focuses on the books of History, highlighting the emergence of Israel as a nation. The fifth section is a discussion of the Writings. The sixth section introduces the books of the Prophets. Section seven will look at the close of the Old Testament before the conclusion of the chapter. An attempt is made throughout this chapter to survey the Old Testament with an African eye. By this I mean that I attempt to read the books of the OT contextually, highlighting how they have been and continue to be used to shape African lives, especially as Christianity is fast becoming an African religion.

Background of the Hebrew Bible

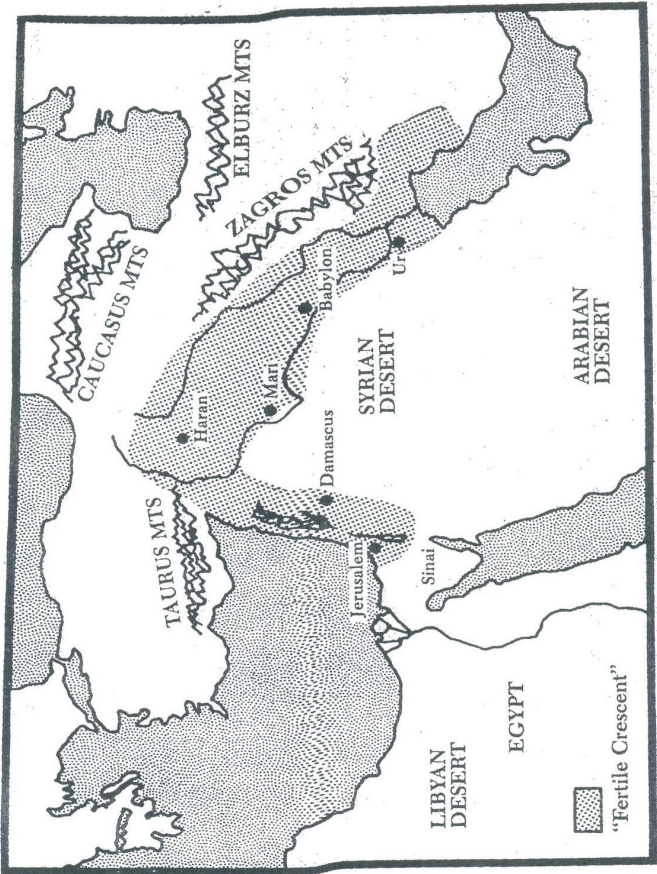
The acts of God and human beings narrated in the OT took place in specific geographical, historical, cultural and religious contexts. Writers of biblical books wrote in these specific contexts. To be heard, they had to use the language that people understood, they had to give examples that people were familiar with and they assumed the cultural practices of the people. In other words, the OT books addressed people who lived more than two to three millenia ago. These people's lives, means of survival and thought patterns were very different from ours. They did not have electricity, cars, cellular phones and

all the other modern gadgets that we can't imagine living without. To understand the Bible we therefore need to understand these people's world.

Geographical Background

The land of the Bible was often known as the Ancient Near East (ANE). Today, it is known as the Near East or the Middle East. It included the modern states of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. The land was characterised by vast geographical and climatic differences, from deserts to rivers, to mountain ranges and fertile farming lands. However, much of the Ancient Near East was a desert and so the inhabitants were concentrated in a wide crescent of agricultural land called the Fertile Crescent. It stretched from the Nile river valley to the Palestinian sea coast through northern Syria. It also included the Mesopotamian river valleys.

Map of the Fertile Crescent (from Boadt 1984:32)



“The Fertile Crescent” in the Ancient Near East

It is along the Fertile Crescent that the earliest human civilisations developed. However, although the biblical drama took place in the Ancient Near East, the land of Palestine was central. This is because Palestine is the land described as ‘flowing with milk and honey’, the Promised Land for God’s chosen people. For Christians, it is the land where God became a human being and was born as Jesus. Knowledge of its geography is therefore indispensable for biblical studies.

Palestine is divided into four geographical zones by its natural features: the coastal plain, the central highlands, the Jordan Rift and the Trans-Jordanian highlands. The diversity in climatic conditions is caused by the region’s close proximity to a desert and a sea and the tremendous variations in elevation. The region experiences a Mediterranean climate of wet winters and dry summers. It receives relief rainfall which falls between late October or early November and late March. The windward side that receives high rainfall covers the two areas of the Mediterranean coast and the northern mountains in the central highlands and the Trans-Jordan. The leeward side which covers the area of the Jordan Rift receives very little rainfall and is therefore a semi-desert.

Historical, Religious and Cultural Background

I pointed out above that the rise of the earliest civilizations took place in the Fertile Crescent. This happened mainly along river valleys: along the Nile river valley in Egypt and along the valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia (modern southern Iraq). The earliest such civilization was the Sumerian civilisation. It is dated between 3500 and 3300 BCE.¹ It is believed that around 3500 BCE, the Sumerians, who possibly came from Iran,² settled in the Euphrates delta and built the first urban centres. Three such centres are remembered in history: the cities of Ur, Eridu and Uruk. The Sumerians constructed large irrigation systems. They also built temples to their gods. The development of urban centres meant people were now staying close to each other and living in large groups. This required laws to be devised to protect property and to foster social order. The practice of irrigation called for the recording of events and activities as they happened throughout the year. This in turn required the development of schools, and the study of mathematics in particular. The Sumerians were the first to develop a number system based on the number 6, not 10 as we have today. They also invented writing, for keeping inventories and other business transactions. They imprinted wedge-shaped symbols, known as cuneiform, on soft clay tablets which were then dried or baked. This made them almost indestructible and so archaeologists have discovered many of them. Through this writing they recorded information about their gods, kings and heroes, some of which are quite similar to the biblical accounts.

¹S. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1997), 37.

²This view is held by L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 40.

The Sumerians were the first to invent the cart-wheel which greatly facilitated travel, trade and economic prosperity. Archaeological evidence shows that with the invention of the wheel, Sumerian merchants began exporting goods as far as Egypt. They also invented the practice of dividing the hour into 60 minutes and the circle into 360 degrees.

The Sumerians also started the idea of centralised administration of cities. It appears that initially the cities were governed by an assembly of citizens chosen from the various classes of citizens, for example, from elders, nobles and priests. However, as time passed, the Sumerians seem to have moved to the practice of being governed by a single king who was believed to be divinely appointed and so ruled as a god or the gods' deputy. They also held a belief in life after death.

Sumerian civilisation was brought to an end by the Akkadians who invaded the Sumerian kingdom in about 2350 BCE. Under their king, Sargon I, the Akkadians were the first to establish an empire. Sargon I is associated with a legend common to several biblical leaders. The legend associates future leaders with narrowly escaping death, growing up in humble circumstances and manifesting unparalleled abilities in adulthood that change the course of history. In the case of Sargon I the legend says that as a baby he was placed in a reed basket that was sealed with bitumen and cast adrift in the Euphrates River. He was then rescued and raised as a gardener.³

The Akkadians were Semites and apart from introducing the Semitic language, their civilisation kept all the aspects of Sumerian civilisation. They wrote hymns, proverbs, myths and developed rituals, many of which were discovered by archaeologists in 1975 at Ebla in northern Syria. The Akkadian civilisation was brought to an end by the Babylonian empire. The invaders that destroyed the Akkadian empire were known as the Amorites (the Westerners). They raided and looted many parts of the Fertile Crescent until they settled down and built two cities in Mesopotamia: Mari and Babylon. The city of Mari is very important, especially for Old Testament studies. From that city came thousands of clay tablets with information that has been used to interpret the stories of Israel's forbears. Another city that has yielded important archaeological information is the city of Nuzi built on the upper Tigris River. Here archaeologists found information that has shed light on legal and marital practices of the second millennium BCE, practices quite similar to those we encounter in the Hebrew Bible.

It was, however, in the city of Babylon that the Amorites founded the Babylonian dynasty. During the reign of the sixth king of the dynasty, Hammurabi, the city became the centre of the new Mesopotamian Empire. Hammurabi reigned for forty-two years, possibly between 1728 and 1686 BCE. Hammurabi is well remembered for his code of law called the Hammurabi Legal Code. The laws share the same literary structure as the Mosaic laws (the laws of Moses). For example, both laws state some form of punishment if a certain act has been committed. These are called casuistic laws. Written on a diorite stone, which has since been discovered by archaeologists, the

³S. Harris, *Understanding the Bible*, 42.

stone bears the portrait of Hammurabi receiving the laws from a sun god called Shamash. Most of the Hammurabi laws, like the Hebrew Bible laws, enforced *lex talionis* (law of retaliation). This was the practice of inflicting as punishment the same kind of injury as suffered by the victim, for example, an eye for an eye.

The last civilisation I will discuss is the Egyptian civilisation. This was located along the Nile River. The fertile land bordering the river was called *Aiguptos* (Hut of Ptah, the Egyptian god). It is from this name *Aiguptos* that 'Egypt' was derived. The Nile valley was considered to be the hut or temple of their god, because Egypt's life was dependent on it. In a land where rainfall was almost unknown, life revolved around the river as it provided water for drinking, for irrigation and also served communication and transport needs. From this valley arose a civilisation that lasted almost 2500 years.

Under its rulers, called the Pharaohs, Egyptian civilisation contributed significantly to human development. The Egyptians developed a calendar of 365 days. They divided the year into twelve months, each with 30 days. They divided the day into 24 hours with each day beginning at midnight. Not only were they good farmers, they were also excellent builders, as evidenced by the great pyramids, one of which is one of the Seven Wonders of the World. They also developed advanced mathematics, astronomy (the study of stars and the solar system) and geometry.

The practice of irrigation meant that even in years when other countries suffered drought, Egypt always had good harvests. As a result, in years of drought, Egypt attracted many foreigners who came to buy food. According to Genesis, this is how the Israelites came to settle in Egypt. Do you remember the story? If not, read Genesis 42. Egyptian civilisation is also associated with the beginning of the worship of one god (monotheism). Some scholars therefore argue that Mosaic religion, which emphasised monotheism, could have been influenced by Egyptian religion.⁴

The Origins of the Old Testament

Forty-six books make up the Old Testament today. This does not mean that these were the only books used in ancient Israel. There were many other books, and over a long period of time the Jewish community agreed on the authority of these forty-six. The process that led to the forty-six attaining canonical status is called canonisation. Canonisation is from the Greek word *kanon*, formed from the Hebrew *kaneh* which means a reed or a rod used for measurement or alignment. By application it was then used to refer to anything used for measurement, be it a ruler, a level or a thermometer. In religious circles, however, a canon is a list of official writings regarded as authoritative in matters of the religious community's faith and life. It is therefore like the constitution of a nation, expressing the basic principles by which the religious community understands itself. Canonisation, then, is the process by which the books or the writings of the religious community attain canonical status. In the case of the Old Testament,

⁴S. Harris, *Understanding the Bible*, 51.

this was the process that led to the acceptance of all of the forty-six books as authoritative.

As I mentioned above, many books were in circulation before the Old Testament took the shape we know today. Some of those books which are not in the Hebrew canon are even referred to in some Old Testament books (Numbers 21:14; Joshua 10:13 and 1 Chronicles 27:24). The criteria used to include and exclude certain books are called the criteria for canonicity. Because the process was long, the criteria used were not clear. In fact one should not think of the criteria as having been set before the books were selected. There was no specific conference called to select the books for inclusion into the canon. It is only when one looks at the books within the canon that one can suggest some criteria which may have been considered. I discuss a few such possible criteria here.

Divine Inspiration is one such criterion that could have been used. It was possibly the most important criterion. According to it, a book was canonized if it was believed to have been inspired by God. Also, it must have been written during the age of the prophets. According to Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, the period of divine (prophetic) inspiration was from the time of Moses to the time of Artaxerxes, the Persian king mentioned in Ezra 4:17.⁵ Thus only books written during this period of divine inspiration, when God was still speaking through prophets, were to be considered for canonization. The belief was that inspired books did not have any errors as God breathed his Spirit into the writers (2 Timothy 3:16).

Another criterion which seems to have been used for canonization was a book's widespread acceptance. It must have enjoyed wide readership and acceptance by the Jews for it to be accepted for canonization. A book which was accepted by just a few people was most unlikely to be canonized. It is for this reason that the Torah (Law) (Genesis to Deuteronomy) was the first to be canonized.

Long Usage was another possible criterion. Books which remained authoritative through many generations were likely to be accepted into the canon. Once the Torah had attained canonical status, it appears that other books were selected on the basis of their conformity to the Torah. Selected books were not to contradict the Torah. It is possibly on the basis of this criterion that nearly all canonical prophets reminded people of the Mosaic covenant.

Although the above are some of the suggested criteria for canonicity, it is important to remember that there were no explicitly defined criteria. A number of factors were at play, as the process of canonization took a very long time and happened in stages. S. L. Harris summarises this succinctly, "The Hebrew bible grew by degrees, its contents expanding to incorporate new documents as Israel's writers over many generations recorded and interpreted their nation's political and spiritual experiences".⁶

⁵O. Kaiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Presentation of its Results and Problems* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 410.

⁶S. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* p.14.

The process that led to the canonization of the Hebrew Bible was a long one, covering several centuries. Our earliest witness of the first steps towards canonization is found in 2 Kings 22. Huldah, the prophetess, was the first to declare a manuscript canonical (authoritative) in 621 BCE. Many scholars believe that this manuscript was an early version of the book of Deuteronomy. Huldah's validation of the book was therefore the first step in a process of canonization which would last several centuries. We do not know exactly how other books of the Pentateuch gained canonical status. However, by 400 BCE, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible had attained this status.

Next to attain canonical status were the books of the Prophets. These are believed to have attained authoritative status by 200 BCE. By the middle of the second century BCE other books, in addition to the Torah and the Prophets, were also added to the canon. It is, however, not clear which these other books were, prior to 70 CE. In 70 CE the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. Following the destruction of the centre of their religion, a council of distinguished Jewish rabbis founded the Academy of Jamnia, outside Palestine, in order to define and consolidate the central teachings of Judaism. The Jamnia meeting of 90 CE then came up with the list of Writings as we know them today. It is this meeting which came up with the canon of the Hebrew Bible with its four literary families. In the rest of this chapter I survey these literary families of the Hebrew Bible.

The Books of Law

The first five books of the Old Testament, as we have seen, were the first to be canonized. They are referred to as the Torah (Law) in Hebrew, and as the Pentateuch (five tools) in Greek. Although all the books of the Hebrew Bible were considered authoritative, these five were regarded as having the highest authority. The books give us an extended history of the world from creation to the formation of the Israelite community. They view this history as a progressive revelation of the will of God. The book of Genesis, which means the beginning, opens with the creation of the world told in mythological form. Accounts of the origin of sin, death, enmity between snakes and human beings, labour pains and so on are given. Genesis also traces the history of the nation of Israel from the call of Abraham to the time of enslavement in Egypt. The history is told in the form of covenant promises for land and nationhood and other blessings. Exodus is at the centre of the books of the Pentateuch. This is because it records God's intervention in the plight of Israel and his call of Israel as his own people. The book also records the story of the ratification of the covenant between God and his people at Mt Sinai (Horeb). As God's people, the Israelites are given the 10 commandments and more than 600 other statutes, ordinances and minute directions on daily issues ranging from diet to worship and sacrifice. Leviticus and Numbers give further details of laws and commandments. Specific regulations are given on sacrifices, priesthood, feasts and laws of purity and holiness. Deuteronomy, which means second law, spells out the results of obedience and disobedience. It is written as Moses' farewell speech at the banks of the Jordan River before the Israelites cross into the Promised Land.

Authorship of the Pentateuch

From the post-exilic period the Pentateuch has been associated with Mosaic authorship. Jewish Rabbis, including Jesus and the writers of New Testament books, took it for granted that Moses wrote the books of the Pentateuch. However, from the beginning of critical biblical scholarship in the 18th century, scholars identified a number of problems with the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Using a method later to be called source criticism, scholars like Richard Simon, Baruch Spinoza, Jean Astruc and many others after them noted repetitions and contradictions in the Pentateuch that pointed against the single authorship of the books.⁷ They also noted that Moses is always referred to in the third person, showing that someone was writing about him. Phrases like ‘until this day’ (Deuteronomy 3:14; 34:6) also clearly indicate that whoever wrote the Pentateuch was looking back from his/her time to that of a distant past. Scholars also queried how Moses could have written about his death and burial (Deuteronomy 34:5). These and many other observations led scholars to dismiss Moses’ authorship of the Torah. Several theories were then put forward to account for the repetitions, contradictions and many other discrepancies in the Pentateuch. Of these many theories, the theory that has earned respect from the majority of scholars and seems to best address the problems is the four documentary hypothesis. This hypothesis, perfected by Julius Wellhausen in 1878, accounts for the redundancies and inconsistencies in the Torah by arguing that whoever put the Pentateuch together made use of four basic sources. The redundancies and inconsistencies are therefore explained in terms of the interweaving of four documents into one.

The Four Documentary Hypothesis

The four sources identified by Wellhausen are J, E, D and P, the first letters of the sources. The earliest of the four sources, J, is named after Jahweh, the German rendering of the divine name Yahweh. According to Wellhausen, this source was composed about 950 BCE during the reign of David and Solomon. The author referred to God as Yahweh. He/She had an anthropomorphic view of God as shown in his/her account of the creation of humanity in Gen 2:4b ff. The author also employed a concrete style of writing. Other characteristics of this source include, referring to the mountain of the covenant as Sinai and emphasizing the tribe of Judah.

The second source is the E source, so-called because its author referred to God as Elohim. According to Wellhausen, this source was written after the division of the monarchy, about 850 BCE. The writer is believed to have been a northerner who wanted to ‘correct’ the J version of Israel’s history in a way that would glorify the Northern Kingdom. E began his account with the creation of the whole universe (Genesis 1:1). The author was less anthropomorphic. God is more abstract and communicates with human beings through intermediaries. Other characteristics of the

⁷For a history of source criticism of the Pentateuch including Wellhausen’s four documentary hypothesis see Norman Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

source include use of the term Horeb for the covenant mountain and use of less picturesque details.

The third source is called D, after its full name, Deuteronomistic source. D is believed to have been written between 650 and 621 BCE after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians. It was therefore written in the Southern Kingdom. The source is confined to the book of Deuteronomy, particularly chapters 12-26. It reflects the literary style and the religious situation during the time of King Josiah's reforms. The source argues for the centralization of worship in Jerusalem, the Davidic royalty and Levitic priesthood. It also emphasizes that obedience to God's ordinances brings blessings while disobedience brings curses.

The fourth source, P, is believed to be the work of priests and thus is called the Priestly source. It is dated about 550 to 400 BCE. It is believed to have been written by Priests and Levites during and after the exile, highlighting priestly concerns and legalistic and cultic aspects of Israel's religion. It lists Israelite censuses and genealogies. Stories of the Sabbath, the sacrificial rituals and the roles of priests are attributed to this source. It is believed that the author(s) was/were responsible for the final shape and structure of the Torah.

Historical Books

The books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are referred to as the Historical books. They are also called the Former Prophets or Deuteronomistic History. Some English Bible translations also include in this category the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Ruth, Esther and the Apocryphal books of Judith, Tobit and 1 and 2 Maccabees. My discussion is, however, restricted to the books of Joshua—2 Kings, which are unanimously accepted as Historical books. The books are called Historical books because as L. Boadt⁸ says, "they were originally edited as a single continuous history of Israel from the days of Moses down to the Babylonian exile." I will explain why they are called the Former Prophets in section 6 of this chapter. They are sometimes referred to as Deuteronomistic History because they are believed to have been edited by someone who shared the theology of the Deuteronomistic source as described above.

In terms of content, the books of Joshua and Judges tell the story of Israel's occupation of Canaan. Although they both treat the same subject, the pictures of Israel's occupation of Canaan presented in the two books are different as we shall briefly discuss below. The books of Samuel and Kings present the origins and development of the institution of kingship in Israel. 1 and 2 Samuel focus on Eli as the last judge of Israel and on the kingly reigns of Saul and David. The two books of Kings take up the history of the kings from where 2 Samuel ends. They present the history of Israel under Solomon, the division of the United Kingdom of Israel after his death, the history of the Northern Kingdom of Israel until its destruction in about 722 BCE and the history of the Southern Kingdom up to the time of the deportation to Babylon

⁸L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*, 195.

in 586 BCE. Although written from a historical perspective, the Historical books are deeply theological, underlining that God rewards the obedient and punishes the disobedient. The Historical books address a number of themes that have received close attention from biblical scholars. Some of these themes are the nature of Israel's occupation of the land of Palestine; gender issues in the historical books, for example the story of Rahab, the rape of the concubine and of Tamar; the origins of the institution of the king in Israel, and land issues as reflected in God's sanctioning of the occupation of Canaanite land by the Israelites. I discuss one of these briefly below.

Israel's Occupation of Canaan

As I mentioned above, Joshua and Judges present two different pictures of Israel's occupation of Palestine. In the book of Joshua, occupation is through military conquest that occurred in three phases: the occupation of the central hill country, the occupation of the southern part and the occupation of the northern part. The military attacks resulting in Israel conquering the land are executed by a united Israel. It is only after the whole land is conquered that Joshua divides it amongst the twelve tribes of Israel. The whole process of conquest was fast and decisive and within five years the land of Canaan was in the hands of the Israelites. In the book of Judges the picture is different. We read there of scattered military operations by individual tribes and tribal groups. Otherwise, the whole process of Israel's settlement in Canaan is a peaceful one among the indigenous people of the land. The Israelites even fail to conquer some twenty cities that Judges mentions by name. They occupy land mainly confined to the mountainous regions of Canaan.

As a result of the different pictures presented by the two biblical books, scholars have come up with at least three theories to explain Israel's occupation of Palestine: the conquest model, the infiltration model and the peasant revolt model.⁹ Suggested by W.F. Albright, E. Wright, J. Bright and Y. Kaufmann, the conquest model follows the Joshua account of the occupation. Using findings from archaeology, they explain the occupation in the light of the semi-nomadic immigrations of the 2nd millennium BCE. The infiltration model, on the other hand, is proposed by A. Alt, M. Noth and Y. Aharoni. The model is based on the book of Judges and sees the occupation as a peaceful and gradual process. Different tribes came at different times, settling peacefully among the original inhabitants of the land. The peasant revolt model is influenced by Marxism and other modern sociological theories. Using these theories, G. Mendenhall and N.K. Gottwald have proposed that Israel's conquest of Palestine was a result of a socio-political upheaval from within the same community. They argue that there was a peasant revolt against the landlords of the Canaanite city states catalysed by a small group of former slaves from Egypt. Yahwism, with emphasis on egalitarianism, helped to unite the peasants against the landlords.

Each of the proposed theories has its shortcomings. Perhaps it is safe to conclude that different tribes occupied Palestine through different methods; some peacefully

⁹L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, 24-25.

and others through war. Our biblical texts therefore present both methods used by Israel to get entry into Palestine. The question of how Israel occupied the land of Palestine is of much interest, particularly in post-colonial contexts such as the African context. Influenced by Joshua, throughout the history of Christianity occupation of other people's lands has been justified. Memories of apartheid South Africa and indeed the occupation of most of the African states bear testimony to this. The colonial masters justified occupation, explaining it as the will of God. African biblical scholars and other post-colonial biblical scholars are now re-interpreting these texts in the light of post-colonial theories.

The Writings

Psalms, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are referred to as the Writings (Kethubim). However, some authors such as L. Harris (1997) also include in this category Ruth, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles and Daniel. These books were the last to be accepted into the OT canon. The Writings include poetry (Psalms, Song of Solomon), wisdom sayings (Proverbs), wisdom literature (Job and Ecclesiastes), short stories marking important Jewish festivals (Ruth and Esther), priestly history (Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles) and apocalyptic visions of the end of this world (Daniel). For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on wisdom literature. I look at the place of wisdom in ancient Israel, consider the characteristics of wisdom literature and then briefly discuss the book of Job as an example of Israelite wisdom literature.

Wisdom in Israel

All societies spend time, energy and resources in equipping the youth with skills to survive. In traditional African societies, such skills included hunting and crafts. The same was true in ancient Israel, and wisdom literature arose in this context.¹⁰ In ancient Israel as in traditional African societies and, indeed, all other societies, the education took place in the family and clan. The family was therefore Israel's origin and source of wisdom. Apart from the family and clan, it appears that in Israel, as in many other societies of ANE, there were also court schools where wisdom was taught. Such court schools were more formal and provided education for a professional class of wise men (and probably women), particularly from the royal family. The sages (wise men) were custodians of societal wisdom. According to G. Fohrer, in ancient Israel, wisdom was a way of coping with life. From the Hebrew word *hokmah*, wisdom designated the skill of an artisan, royal judgement, cleverness or proper rules of conduct devoted to practical ends. Thus B.W. Anderson¹¹ is correct to view wisdom literature as Hebrew humanism. The goal of wisdom was a good life here and now,

¹⁰J. Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), 266-272.

¹¹B. W. Anderson, *A critical introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd, 1959), 182.

marked by longevity, prosperity and prestige. The wise (or sages) served as counsellors of kings.

Characteristics of Wisdom Literature

Expressed in many different forms, riddles, fables and proverbs, Hebrew wisdom literature's first characteristic is its marked absence of reference to Israel's sacred traditions: patriarchs, exodus, covenant and so on. Secondly, the literature has an international outlook, for example the appearance of non-Israelites like Agur and Lemuel in Proverbs 30 and 31. Thirdly, there is also no personal relationship between believers and God and so there is limited use of the phrase "Thus says the Lord..." Lastly, wisdom literature tends to emphasise the success and well-being of an individual. Unlike the prophets, who emphasized the corporate and religious life of Israel, wisdom literature focuses on the individual. This, however, does not mean that wisdom literature should be considered secular since for Israelite sages, "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10).

The Book of Job

The book of Job is an example of speculative wisdom: a kind of wisdom that questions commonly-held beliefs. Influenced by the book of Deuteronomy, the popularly-held belief in ancient Israel was that God rewards the righteous and punishes the unrighteous. Most of us still hold to this belief. Recently a church friend asked me why Africa faces more human crises than the Western world when it is home to the majority of Christians. The author of Job asked such a question.

The book of Job can be divided into two sections. First is the prose section which is made up of the prologue and epilogue. This section tells of the piety of Job and how he suffered because of an argument between God and Satan. Although completely innocent, Job suffered loss of family, property, prestige and health. The second section is a poetic one in which Job, in responding to his friends, questions the justice of God. The book of Job is therefore a theodicy, that is, the questioning of God's justice in the light of the suffering of the innocent. It raises many questions about the assumed nature of God. From the viewpoint of orthodox Jewish theology, the questions Job asked bordered on blasphemy. The book, however, does not provide clear answers even on the question of the suffering of the innocent.

The Prophets

Fifteen books belong in the category of Prophetic books. These bear the names of the prophets. The fifteen are referred to as the Latter Prophets as distinguished from the Former Prophets we discussed in section 4 of this chapter. Prophetic books, or the prophets, are normally divided into two groups: major and minor prophets. The terms "major" and "minor" refer merely to the length of the respective compositions and not to any distinction in the prophetic office. The major prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The minor prophets are Hosea through to Micah. Prophets were men and women who spoke the word of God to the people after an intense experience of God.

They therefore received a call for a specific task at a specific time and to a specific group of people. In this section I look briefly at how the books of the prophets were compiled, what distinguishes the books of the Latter Prophets from those of the Former Prophets and then look at the prophetic message of Amos, as an example of a prophetic book.

Compilation of Prophetic Books

The books of the prophets are compilations of the messages of the prophets. Contrary to popular understanding, Old Testament prophets were not just clairvoyants and foretellers.¹² This doesn't mean that they did not foretell, rather that they were more of forthtellers than foretellers. Analyses of various terms used for a prophet¹³ have proved this correct. Prophets were spokespersons of God sent with specific messages to the people of their day. They presented these words in different forms: through symbolic actions, through speech and in written form. The prophets themselves could write their messages or they could make use of secretaries. There are, however, some who just preached orally and their messages were written by their disciples later, sometimes after their deaths. Thus the prophetic books developed through small collections made at different times in the history of the book. As B.W. Anderson¹⁴ says, "The prophetic books are collections of material, or more precisely, collections of smaller collections of material." These early collections were no doubt edited at various points in history as redactors sought to bring out the significance of the prophets' original messages for a later age. These editors had to put together different prophetic collections. This way the prophetic books assumed the written form in which we know them today.

Former and Latter Prophets

The books we have described as the Former Prophets have records of prophetic activities. The prophets Nathan, Gad, Ahijah, Micaiah, Elijah and Elisha appear prominently in these books. The books, however, are not entirely devoted to the prophetic acts of the prophets. They are more historical, presenting a narrative of events in Israelite history from the period of Israel's entrance into Canaan until the exile to Babylon. It was only after 750 BCE that the disciples of a prophet began to collect and write down the oracles of their master under the prophet's name. This process began with the book of Amos. Thus the Latter prophets are sometimes referred to as the Writing Prophets. The Former Prophets usually addressed ethical issues but also played political roles in elevating or overthrowing kings. On the other hand, the Latter Prophets were more international in operation, addressing three critical periods

¹²A. R. Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 181.

¹³Ceresko, 182. See also W. S. Lasor, D. A. Hubbard and F. W. M. Bush, *The Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 298-299.

¹⁴B. W. Anderson, *A critical introduction to the Old Testament*, 100.

of Israel and Judah's history: the Assyrian crisis leading to the fall of Israel in 721 BCE, the Babylonian crisis leading to the fall of Judah in 586 BCE and the crisis following the return from Babylonian exile in 536 BCE. The books are, however, not historical in their approach. Rather they contain more of the preaching messages of the prophets, an element absent from the books of the Former Prophets.¹⁵ Therefore, to understand each prophetic book one needs to be aware of the historical circumstances that the prophet was addressing.

The Book of Amos

The book of Amos is the best example of the way in which the prophetic books were formed.¹⁶ As mentioned above, prophetic books developed through different stages beginning with the preaching of the prophet himself. I will focus here on the message of Amos and the circumstances that gave rise to the message. Most of the prophetic books developed in the same manner and, when studying them, one needs to begin with the period of the prophet.

Three main types of material are found in the prophetic books: prophetic oracles, which are the utterances of the prophet and usually appear in poetic form, narratives about the prophet's life, written in the third person, and narratives about the prophet's experiences, written in the first person. From the narratives in the book of Amos, as in other prophetic books, we learn that the prophet was a shepherd from the town of Tekoa (Amos 1:1) and that although he prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, he was a native of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Amos prophesied during the time of King Jeroboam II some time around 786-750 BCE.

The message in the book of Amos is that of the impending destruction of the kingdom of Israel. He has been described by some scholars as a prophet of doom.¹⁷ This is because Amos' message was full of the threat of doom. His visions (Amos chapters 7-9), his view of the day of the Lord as a day of total darkness and his message to the rich, all pointed to the nearness and certainty of Israel's destruction. To understand why Amos spoke as he did, one needs to understand the socio-political and economic situation which he addressed. Amos prophesied during an age of general prosperity in Israel. The reign of Jeroboam II (786-756 BCE) coincided with the retreat of the imperial ambitions of super powers like Assyria. As a result, Israel enjoyed a period of peace and managed to expand its borders and to strengthen its economy. However, as is happening in most post-colonial African states, the wealth of the nation was enjoyed by a few corrupt elite. There was no longer communal ownership of resources such as land as a few individuals accumulated large tracts of land. The rich and affluent still thronged the places of worship but were no longer

¹⁵The messages are often introduced by the expression, "Thus says the Lord" or end with "says the Lord".

¹⁶A. R. Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 198

¹⁷B. W. Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament* (Essex: Longman, 1993), 280-310.

observing the covenant their forbears had entered into with Yahweh. A.R. Ceresko¹⁸ explains what the situation was like:

Motivated by greed and a lust for power, and intent on aping the elegant and the arrogant trappings of the court and ruling classes of imperial powers like Assyria, the nobility and rich merchant classes of the northern kingdom ignored the covenant obligations towards their fellow Israelites. Instead of low or no-interest loans to help a family through a period of economic hardship brought on by drought, for example, they charged exorbitant interest rates, often 50% or more.

Many of those who borrowed therefore failed to repay the loans and their lands were taken by the rich. Amos had to speak for the voiceless poor, reminding people of the statutes of Yahweh. Thus, like many Old Testament prophets, Amos' message was provoked by the situation in which he found his contemporaries.

But Amos did not only pronounce doom on Israel. There are also overtones of hope in the book, especially in the last five verses of the book. These verses have provoked hot debates among scholars. "Is it justifiable then to describe Amos as a prophet of doom?", some have asked. Others have even concluded that the last passages on hope were not from Amos, the eighth century prophet. Be that as it may, the contrasting views in Amos of Israel's future show that prophetic books grew over time. My opinion of the contrasting views is that the generations that followed Amos continued to use Amos' words but shaped them according to their own contexts. The element of hope in the book could therefore have been added after the exile in Babylon, when the threat of Israel's utter destruction was over. This adaptation of prophets' messages is observable in most of the prophetic books.

The Closing of the Old Testament

The last books of the Old Testament such as the book of Daniel can be dated to a period around the third century BCE. Reading the Old Testament may lead one to assume that Judaism as a religion was dying. This is, however, not so. Judaism remained vibrant even after the last books of the Hebrew Bible were closed. Most of the books that show the vibrancy of the religion were, unfortunately, left out of the canon. These books, for example the books of the Maccabees, Tobit, Sirach and others, are now called apocryphal books. Although protestant churches do not consider them canonical, the Catholic Church does. A period of about two centuries separates the books of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament. This period is called the inter-testamental period and saw the rise of the Greeks under Alexander the Great and his successors, leading to the rise of the Romans. Apart from the production of apocryphal books, a vast amount of literature on Judaism was also produced in the form of Rabbinic interpretations of the law.

¹⁸Ceresko, 200.

Conclusion

The Old Testament is the story of Israel's journey with God from the creation of the world to the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity. The books that make up the Old Testament can be placed within this continuum. This chapter has approached the Hebrew Bible from this perspective. It has surveyed the Hebrew Bible from a historical perspective. I divided the books into broad literary categories of the Torah, History, the Writings and the Prophets. For each category I focused on a specific book or theme as a way of giving the general contents of the category. In some cases, for example, the Torah, it was possible to survey all the books in the category. However, for those categories with many books, for example, the Prophets, this was not possible. The chapter ended by underlining the fact that Judaism remained a vibrant religion producing more literature even after the 'close' of the Old Testament.

CHAPTER THREE

Major Theological Themes in the Old Testament

Masego Kanis and Lovemore Togarasei

Introduction

Approaches to Old Testament theology are very much varied. For some, it is about the place of the Old Testament for a modern believer¹ while for others it concerns the overarching themes of the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible).² In this chapter we are not interested in the debate on what methodology Old Testament theology should take. Rather we focus on the major themes in the Old Testament. These themes arise from a careful analysis of events that have had an impact on the history and lives of the Israelites.

We approach the Old Testament as a story of the salvation brought to the Israelites by God. In its books the Israelites expressed their understanding of who God is. They recorded what he had done in their lives over ages and what they ought to do as his chosen people.

We will soon identify the pattern of these themes. God continually desires a relationship through the covenant with his chosen people. They on the other hand, in their quest to find their footing and a place of belonging in a world full of pagan practices, frequently walked away from the covenantal agreement.

Creation (Genesis 1 and 2)

Like any other culture the Hebrew people had myths or epics that explained creation and other mysteries of life. Creation according to the Hebrew Bible was the work of God alone through word of mouth. Before creation everything was formless and void. God simply enacted things by using the phrase “Let there be” or just “Let...” and it was done.

The first thing to be enacted by this command, a command which seems to be directed at the “formlessness” and the “void” is the light. The command was “Let there be light”; and there was light. God then separated the light from the darkness and called the light “day” and the darkness “night”. All this took place on the first day.

¹J. Barton, “Old Testament Theology” in J. Rogerson (ed.), *Beginning Old Testament Study*, London: SPCK, 1983, 90-112.

²See L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*, New York: Paulist Press, 1984, 543; also R. Coggins, *Introducing the Old Testament*, New York: The Oxford University Press, 2003, 140.

After the light God created the dome of the sky on the second day and placed some water below it and above it. This was followed by the parting of the lower waters on the third day so that dry land appeared and vegetation was commanded to sprout on the newly exposed ground. The sun, moon and stars were created on the fourth day for light and for purposes of time.

On the fifth day the living creatures of the sea and air were made, and on the sixth the beasts of the earth and finally human beings. There are two stories of the creation of human beings (Gen. 1:1-2:4a and Gen. 2:4b ff). In the first story of creation both the man and the woman are created at the same time. In the second, the man is created first then the woman is created from the rib of the man.

We note that the language of God changes with regards to the creation of human beings. “Let there be” or “Let...” becomes “*Let us* make man in *our* image”. This switch in language has caused many debates in theological circles. Some argue that the Israelites projected into the divine realm their own use of an assembly of advisors who assisted royal decision making.³ Lately a common explanation offered by Christians is that God was referring to the Spirit of God which was hovering over the surface of the waters (Gen 1:2) and to Jesus Christ.

This is the creation account of the Israelite nation. Creation was a sovereign act of their God, Yahweh alone. Yahweh is transcendent over creation. But biblical scholars have found that the Old Testament order of creation is very similar to the Babylonian story of creation or Enuma Elish. Some biblical scholars assert that much of the material contained in the primeval epics in Genesis is borrowed from other Ancient Near Eastern cultures.⁴ This argument is based on the templates containing this information unearthed in the 19th century which pre-date the biblical account of creation. The Babylonian account of creation tells how the gods first appeared before the beginning of things and made the heavens above and the earth below. Conflict soon erupted between Marduk, the god of light, and Tiamat, a goddess of the “deep” or chaos. Marduk won the war against his own mother, Tiamat. He won by means of his storm weapons of thunder, wind and lightning and slew Tiamat. Marduk then took one half of Tiamat’s body to cover the heavens, and the other half to make the earth. He also furnished the heavens with the stars and signs of the zodiac. On the sixth day man was created. The correlation between the two creation accounts is illustrated below.

Enuma Elish

Divine spirit and cosmic matter are co-existent and co- eternal.

Primeval chaos: Tiamat is enveloped in darkness

Genesis

Divine spirit creates cosmic matter and exists independently of it.

The earth is a desolate waste with darkness covering the deep (chaos).

³V. H. Matthews et al, *The Old Testament Text and Contexts*, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997, 48.

⁴Matthews et al, *The Old Testament Text*44.

Enuma Elish***Genesis***

Light emanating from the gods

Light is created.

The creation of the firmament/sky

The creation of the firmament/sky.

Creation of dry land.

Creation of dry land.

Creation of the sun, moon and stars

Creation of the sun, moon and stars.

Creation of mankind

Creation of mankind.

The gods rest and celebrate.

God rests and celebrates.

Some authors like Purkiser et al⁵ reject the claim that the Old Testament epic of creation borrowed heavily from the Enuma Elish. Their argument is that the polytheism of the Babylonian account contrasts with the true monotheism of the account of Genesis. They further point out that in the Babylonian account the creation was partly the result of the blind force and conflict between the divinities while in Genesis "...the one Supreme Being made all things with no conflict, his spirit moving "upon the face of the waters." They further contend that the Old Testament account is far superior. It preserves the record without the superstition and crude polytheism of the Babylonian tradition. They argue that the very existence of such ancient parallels bears witness to the factual source from which the corrupt tradition came.

Matthews et al⁶ however do not accept Purkiser's view. They are baffled by how the Israelites were able as they see it, to use and transform foreign epic material and religious dramas of the ancient Near East into a distinctive model that was uniquely their own. Purkiser and Matthews represent the two factions among biblical scholars concerning this issue.

There is yet another issue concerning the disparities in God's name in the Pentateuch and the creation accounts. In the first creation story God's name is Elohim while in the second creation story God's name is Yahweh. This shows that from the beginning, the Jews did not have a single name for their God. Source criticism has shown that whereas the northern kingdom of Israel preferred the name Elohim for God, the southern kingdom of Judah preferred the name Yahweh. This is reflected in the creation narratives.

The Patriarchs and Matriarchs (Genesis 12-50)

Another major theme in Old Testament theology is the story of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel. The primeval history (Gen 1-11) concludes with the flood story and other stories explaining the dispersal of the peoples of the earth and the origins of their different languages.

⁵W. T. Purkiser et al, *Exploring the Old Testament*, Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1955, 73.

⁶Matthews et al, *The Old Testament Text*, 44.

Then follows the theme of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel. Genesis 12-50 describe the foundation of the nation of Israel through several generations. This history of Israel's ancestors is presented through three collections of narratives: the Abraham-Sarah narrative, the Jacob-Esau narrative and the Joseph narrative. Between the first and the second narratives is the Isaac narrative to which the author(s) of Genesis did not give as much attention as the other narratives.

The Abraham-Sarah Narrative

The narrative begins with Yahweh commanding Abram to "...go to the land that I will show you" (Gen.12:2). This meant that he had to leave his family, friends, cousins, aunts, his clan and his land and go to an unknown land that he is yet to be shown. This "going" was not without some benefits. Yahweh promised Abram three things if he paid heed to the "go" imperative. He promised to make him a great nation, to bless him, make his name great so that he would be a blessing. Abram was seventy five years old at the time of his election. Even though the message was directed at Abram alone he did not set off alone, but was accompanied by his wife, Sarah and his nephew, Lot. J.E. Hartley⁷ (2000: 134) says that we may assume that Abram may have tried to persuade his other relatives to leave with him but only Lot, whom Abram had fostered after his father's death agreed. The trio, accompanied by herders and servants and Abram's livestock took off from Haran and headed for Canaan. After Abram had pitched his tent in Canaan at Shechem, Yahweh appeared to him and confirmed his earlier order to "go to the land that I will show you". Yahweh said to Abram, "I will give this land to your descendants". Abram then created a shrine or an altar in commemoration of this theophany.

When a famine struck Canaan, Abram and his household were forced to flee and seek food in Egypt. Abram decided to lie that Sarah was his sister. He was afraid that because of her beauty, the Egyptians would kill him and take her. He did the same with Abimelech of Gerar. In both cases Abram leaves the kings a rich man (Genesis 20). As Abram grew rich, Lot also grew rich. Lot and Abram are said to have been rich in livestock but also in silver and gold.

After being chased out of Egypt they settled at an area of Canaan called the Negev (Gen.13). However a fight over ground for pasture ensued between their herders because of their large numbers of livestock. Abram suggested that they part and allowed Lot to choose pasturing land for his livestock. Lot chose the plain of the Jordan because it had fertile ground (v.10). He later moved into the city of Sodom whose inhabitants, according to the narrative were sinful. Abraham on the other hand settled in the land of Canaan. Immediately after Lot and Abraham's separation God granted land to Abraham thus fulfilling the promise he had made to him when he called him.

But the promise of a family and many descendants was yet to be fulfilled. Yahweh then appeared to Abram in a vision and promised him progeny (Genesis 15:4-5). Abram doubted the promise because God had made this promise before and so far it had not been fulfilled. However God continued to reiterate his promises. He reaffirmed to

⁷J. E. Hartley, *Genesis*, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000, 134.

Abram that his family would greatly increase. He promised to bring a child out of their shrivelled old bodies.

Yahweh even changed Abram's name to Abraham. The word *ab* of Ab-ram in Hebrew means father. The *ram* means exalted. But his new name Ab-raham has a whole new meaning *ab* as stated above means father and *raham* means multitude. The new name was a confirmation on God's part that indeed Abraham would have multitudes of descendants. In that culture a change in name meant a change in either one's character or one's destiny. God promised Abraham "I will establish my covenant between you and me, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant". The covenant is that God will always be the God of the descendants of Abraham and the entire land of Canaan would be given to Abraham and his descendants.

Yahweh then goes back to the motif of obedience which is the condition of the covenant: the responsibility of Abraham and his descendants is to obey the covenant. To enter or seal the covenant each male child was to be circumcised on the eighth day. The flesh of their foreskin was to be cut off. This would apply also to servants born amongst the Hebrews and foreign born servants whom they would purchase. The circumcision was to be the hallmark of the everlasting covenant between the Hebrews (and their slaves and servants) and Yahweh. Eventually, a year after God's prediction a son was born to Abraham and Sarah. In spite of their old age, the couple had a son in fulfilment of God's promise. God, therefore, proved to be a faithful God who keeps his promises.

The Jacob-Esau Narrative

The Abraham cycle ends with Sarah dying at the age of one hundred and twenty seven years. Abraham then lays claim to the land by buying the cave of Machpelah to bury Sarah. Abraham then asked his servant to go back to Haran where he, Abraham came from to look for a wife for Isaac. Abraham finally died at an advanced age of one hundred and seventy five years after witnessing the marriage of Isaac to Rebekah.

The union of Isaac and Rebekah resulted in the birth of twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Very little is said about Isaac. He barely stands out in his own right, and serves mainly as a bridge to the saga of Jacob.⁸ Attention rather is focused on Jacob, the trickster. Jacob grew up to be conniving and calculative. With the help of his mother he stole Esau's birthright. He also tricked Laban, his father in-law out of his livestock. It is from Jacob that the twelve tribes of Israel came.

The Joseph Narrative

Genesis 37-50 focuses on Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, who was sold by his brothers into slavery. When famine struck Palestine, Joseph's brothers were forced to go to Egypt to ask for food. After a series of incidents Joseph identified himself to them. The Hebrew family then moved to Egypt and lived amicably with the Egyptians for a long time. Then however a new Pharaoh arose and forced them into captivity.

⁸Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament...*, 145.

Analysis

Scholarly preoccupation with the patriarchal and matriarchal stories has been on whether they can help shed light on the history of Israel. The question asked is: were the patriarchs and matriarchs real people? We note here the views of two schools of thought: the form critical school and the archaeological school.

Form critics have rejected the historicity of the figures. They have described the stories of Israel's ancestors as sagas. A Germany scholar called Martin Noth, for example, concluded that there were no such figures as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Rather he says there were tribes from which developed ancestral figures.

In support of Noth, another Germany scholar, Albrecht Alt noted that the patriarchs even worshipped different gods. Abraham worshipped the Shield of Abraham (Genesis 15:1), Isaac worshipped the Fear of Isaac (Genesis 31:42,53) and Jacob worshipped the Mighty One of Jacob (Genesis 49:24). He concluded that these gods were associated with different tribes and that it was only when the tribes came together in Palestine that they forged their different religious traditions together in order to bring unity in the new nation.

Sagas are heroic stories about family ancestors. Often they are meant to show the great and fearless powers of a family's great-great grandparent(s). Because sagas are repeated orally for a long time before they are written down, they tend to come in different versions. The patriarchal and matriarchal stories of Genesis show these signs of sagas. Compare Genesis 12:10-20, 20:1-18 and 26:1-11. As Boadt⁹ correctly says, "there would be only one chance in a million that such a coincidence of events could happen three times in one generation." It is more likely that these are three versions of one original story, otherwise how could both Abraham and King Abimelech fall into such a trap twice in their lives?

In the 20th century a number of archaeological discoveries were made in the lands of the Bible. These discoveries have thrown new light on biblical studies. In the case of the patriarchal and matriarchal traditions, most of the discoveries were made at the sites of Mari and Nuzi in ancient Mesopotamia. Using evidence from these sites three scholars, E. Wright, W.F. Albright and J. Bright concluded that the patriarchal and matriarchal stories are historical and reliable and that the patriarchs and matriarchs were real people. They based their claims on the following evidence.

First, they considered the names of the patriarchs. From evidence from Mari and Nuzi, names like Abraham, Terah, Ishmael, Jacob, and so on, were confirmed. Although these names were not necessarily referring to our biblical figures, the evidence showed that these were common names during the second millennium BCE, when the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel are believed to have lived.

Second, archaeological evidence also confirmed the patriarchal life style as it is recorded in Genesis. The patriarchs are presented as nomadic people moving from one place to the other in search of pasture for their herds. They moved in large groups and were also involved in some trade as they are associated with major trade routes

⁹Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*...., 149.

and trade centres. Evidence from Mari and Egypt shows that migrating pastoralism was a common life style in the second millennium BCE.

Third, patriarchal and matriarchal customs have also been confirmed by archaeological evidence. Customs such as the use of a slave girl to bear children for a childless couple (Gen. 16:30), the adoption of a slave as heir by a childless couple (Gen. 15:1-5), lying that one's wife is a sister (Gen.12:10-20), the role of household gods (Gen. 31:19) have been confirmed by archaeological evidence.

Over and above this evidence, archaeology has proved that some social and legal customs of the patriarchs and matriarchs are different from those of later Israel. For example, whereas Lev. 18:18 forbids a man be married to two sisters at once, Jacob was (Gen. 29:15-30). Marrying one's sister was forbidden (Le.18:8) but Abraham married his half-sister (Gen. 20:12). Noting this, the archaeological school has concluded that the presence of these anomalies in the patriarchal and matriarchal narratives shows that the authors did not try to assimilate practices of their day into these stories but presented them as they knew them, authentically.

As the two opposing positions of the form critical and the archaeological schools show, a solid answer concerning the historicity of Israel's ancestral figures cannot be given. Each of the two views has its own strengths and weaknesses. Be that as it may the stories, whether historical or legendary serve a number of purposes in our study of the Old Testament. They tell the importance of ancestral figures for the unity of Israel. They tell the story of the beginning of Israel's religion. In spite of their patriarchal influence, the place and role of women can be discerned. As A. R. Ceresko¹⁰ says, "Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Tamar, all demonstrate initiative, strength of will, intelligence, wisdom, self-possession, and a degree of independence in their dealings with the male figure." The stories also serve to show Israel's understanding of the place of God in her history. For the Israelites, he is a God who has accompanied them from the foundation of their nation.

The Exodus (Book of Exodus)

The other major theological theme in the Old Testament is the Exodus. The biblical account in 1 Kings 6:1 places the exodus in the fifteenth century BCE or 480 years before Solomon began building the temple in Jerusalem.¹¹

Jacob's family had settled in Egypt at a time when Egypt was under foreign rule by the Hyksos, literally the "foreign chiefs".¹² These were rulers of Semitic origin who had gained control of Egypt's government. It must have been after their expulsion by the native Egyptians that the new pharaoh who did not know the Hebrews came into power. Because they had multiplied he became alarmed at their numbers. He feared that should an eastern army invade Egypt the Hebrews could join them and become their allies.

¹⁰A. R. Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A liberation perspective*, New York: Orbis Books, 2001, 53

¹¹Matthews et al, *The Old Testament Text*...., 57.

¹²Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*...., 56.

Pharaoh came up with strategies to crush them both mentally and physically. Shrewd taskmasters were appointed to supervise the pharaoh's brick making and building projects. Midwives were ordered to kill all male children. In this context, Moses was born and grew up to be the liberator of the oppressed Israelites. Yahweh called Moses at the age of eighty to deliver his people from captivity.

Although the Egyptian pharaoh tried to refuse the Israelites the right to leave, Yahweh's intervention through the plagues forced him to allow them to go. For the Israelites this action of Yahweh was very central to their theology. It was a clear testimony that their God was a God not limited to a particular place and people. Even in a land so alien as Egypt, he could act in miraculous ways to deliver his people.

Looked at from a historical point of view, the exodus event has many problems. To start with, extra-biblical sources for a clear date of the exodus and the settlement periods are scarce. Archaeological evidence as contained in the Tell-el-Armana letters and the building of the cities of Pithom and Rameses is also contradictory and incomplete. According to Matthews et al¹³ Egyptian sources do not mention the exodus, although there is evidence of the use of forced labour to construct the Egyptian store-house cities of Pithom and Ramses in the time of Seti I and Ramses II (ca 1300-1250 BCE).

Another historical problem with the exodus event is the exact nature of the exodus. There are two versions. One version says that the Hebrews fled without Pharaoh's knowledge (Exo. 14:5, 12:39) while the other version says the departure was very deliberate with the Hebrews leaving as a military column (Exo. 13:18-19; 11:1-2; 12:35-36).

The number of people involved in this event has also been a basis for questioning the historicity of the event. According to Exo. 12:37-38, 600,000 men left with their wives and children. As J. H. Hayes¹⁴ noted, if the number of women and children is included, then the total number of people who left Egypt was about two and half million, "Enough to reach in a single file from Cairo to Jerusalem and back again!"

Be that as it may, the event of the exodus, whether it included millions or just a small group of people, formed an indelible mark in the theology of Israel. The event marked the beginning of the nation of Israel since all the other traditions before the exodus were about individuals and their clans. The exodus convinced the Israelites that the God who had appeared separately to their forefathers was indeed one God bound to them as one people.¹⁵ Through this liberating act of God, the Israelites came to know God as a loving and trustworthy God.

The exodus event became a rallying point for Israel's national unity. Rituals associated with it such as the Passover, were instituted. Even when they were settled in the Promised Land, they had always to remind their children, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt and the Lord brought us out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand,

¹³Matthews et al, *The Old Testament Text*....., 58.

¹⁴J. H. Hayes, *Introduction to the Bible*, London: SCM Press, 1973, 67.

¹⁵Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*....., 155.

...” (Deut. 6:21). The story of the exodus cannot however be understood in isolation. It is intricately connected to Israel’s experiences in the wilderness and in the conquest of the Promised Land.

The Covenant (Exodus-Deuteronomy)

Israel had escaped physical bondage in Egypt, but there was still so much to be gained in moral and spiritual discipline. Moses was to be God’s representative in establishing a permanent covenant relationship for the Hebrew nation.¹⁶

The giving of the Ten Commandments/ Decalogue was a move towards establishing a guideline for the spiritual and moral discipline of the Israelites. The Decalogue was the fulfilment of the covenant that God made with Abraham, God was now formalising this covenant and extending it to include the larger community of Israel. The covenant was a binding force between the Israelites and God. It was central to Israelite lives. God had been faithful to them by delivering them from the shackles of the Egyptians so they too had to display their faithfulness to him by obeying the Covenant. The Covenant governed the spiritual, social and political lives of the Israelites. It was a yard stick with which all the Israelites had to measure their lives. Boadt could not be more precise when he says;

“...it becomes the standard for judging Israel’s national success or failure for the period of the conquest in Joshua and Judges; it serves as a measuring stick for each king of Israel in the books of Samuel and Kings; it forms the background of the prophets’ oracles of promise and judgment to Israel from the tenth century until after the exile; it shapes the thought of Deuteronomy in interpreting the entire story of Israel in light of fidelity to the covenant of Sinai”.¹⁷

What then is this covenant, which is central to the Israelite life? The word covenant is *berit* in Hebrew. The root idea of the word is bind; it binds together the concerned parties and the concerned parties mutually agree to honour the terms and conditions of the covenant, thus they are obliged and bound by the covenant. The covenant or the law begins from the book of Exodus with the Sinai covenant. There are seven major bodies of law; the Decalogue (Exod. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-21), Covenant Code (Exod. 20:18-23:33), Ritual Decalogue (Exod. 34: 11-26), Deuteronomistic Code (Deut. 12-26), Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26), Priestly Code (Lev. 1-16, 27, Num. 1-10) and the Curses Code (Deut. 27: 14-26).

The Decalogue is written in apodictic style. These are commands or laws that require the concerned party to say nothing except “Amen.” The laws found in the Books of Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy are casuistic laws, laws that dealt with secular matters and usually called for retaliation (a tooth for a tooth). In nearly every instance they are a reflection of the legal formulas presented in the Ten Com-

¹⁶Purkiser et al, *Exploring the Old Testament*...., 123.

¹⁷Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*...., 174.

mandments and are the results of the Judges asking the question “But what if?” about a particular legal phrase. The laws are designed to regulate the life of the people. It was necessary for the law to be dynamic to suit the changing lives of the people.¹⁸

The covenant is similar to what we call *meila* and *setho/botho* in Setswana. *Meila* equates to taboos and *botho/setho* equates to norms and values or case law. The Decalogue because of its apodictic nature qualifies as *meila*. The Decalogue usually starts with “You must not.../Do not...” *meila* are usually structured in the same manner; *O seka.../Ga o a tshwanela...* They are commands that an individual has to follow. They can also be translated as taboos. The nature of *meila* such as the Ten Commandments is they leave no room for an individual to do otherwise. One example of a Setswana *moila* is “*Ngwana wa mosetsana ga a tshwanela go tlhapa bosigo*” (A girl child is not supposed to bathe at night/when the sun has gone down). The difference between Setswana culture and the Israelite culture is that with the Israelites obedience of these commandments was first and foremost a duty to their God, whereas in Setswana culture there was no clear cut line between the religious, social and political spheres. These three aspects of the society overlapped. An example of the Setswana norms and value which matches with the Israelite case law is “*E anyang e leletse e ruta e e mo maleng.*” This is a proverb which encourages good Batswana to be upright people in their dealings and interactions with each other because failure to do so will result in the young imitating their not so desirable attitude and behaviour.

The covenant brought the Israelites into a personal relationship with God: through it they became God’s people and he became their God. For some scholars, it is through the covenant that Yahwism as a religion began.¹⁹ From this event the Israelites knew and worshipped God as the one who had heard their cry in Egypt. He had personally intervened in their suffering to bring about freedom and now led them to a future full of promises.

The Conquest of and Settlement in Canaan (Joshua and Judges)

The conquest and possession of the land of Canaan is recorded in the Books of Joshua and Judges. Joshua chapters 2-12 describe the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites. Chapters 13-22 describe how Joshua allotted the land to the different Israelite tribes. In the final chapters (23-24), Joshua bids farewell to the Israelite community and exhorts them to continue to be faithful to God.

Joshua presents the conquest of Canaan by Israel as a swift exercise. The Israelites, it seems, were obedient to God during that time while Joshua acted as a commander in chief of the Israelite army and a mediator between the community of Israel and God. Among the cities conquered by Israel were Jericho, Ai, Hazor Lachish, Tell Beit, Mirsim and the Hittite Kingdom in Anatolia. In all these conquests and throughout Israel’s battles with other nations, Joshua portrays Yahweh as a divine warrior and

¹⁸Matthews et al, *The Old Testament Text*....., 63.

¹⁹B. W. Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament*, Essex; Longman, 1993, 65.

each war is won by direct intervention of Yahweh. Yahweh became famous with each conquest for fighting on the side of Israel hence Rahab, the prostitute confessed;

“...We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Joshua 2: 10-11).

In the book of Judges the picture of Israel’s conquest of Canaan is different. We read there of scattered military operations by individual tribes and tribal groups. Otherwise the whole process of Israel’s settlement in Canaan is a peaceful one among the indigenous people of the land. The Israelites even fail to conquer some twenty cities that Judges mentions by name. The Israelites occupy mainly the mountainous regions of Canaan. As a result of the different pictures presented by the two biblical books, scholars have proposed at least three theories to explain Israel’s occupation of Canaan: the conquest model, the infiltration model and the peasant revolt model.²⁰

Suggested by W.F. Albright, E. Wright, J. Bright and Y. Kaufmann, the conquest model follows the Joshua account of the occupation. Using findings from archaeology, they explain the occupation in light of the semi-nomadic immigrations of the 2nd millennium BCE. Archaeological evidence from Jericho, Hazor and Lachish, for example, has been used to corroborate the sudden and violent destructions described in the book of Joshua.

The infiltration model, on the other hand, is proposed by A. Alt, M. Noth and Y. Aharoni. The model is based on the book of Judges and sees the occupation as a peaceful and gradual process. This school dismisses the archaeological school noting, for example, that only two or three sites out of nineteen possibly identified with sites in Joshua demonstrate evidence of destruction in the thirteenth century. The school thus agrees with Judges that different tribes came at different times. They settled peacefully, first in unoccupied hill areas of Palestine, and later infiltrated the original inhabitants of the land.

These two theories find Israel’s origins to be outside Palestine. The peasant revolt model is influenced by Marxism and other modern sociological theories and sees Israel’s origin to be from within Palestine. G. Mendenhall and N.K. Gottwald propose that Israel’s conquest of Palestine was a result of a socio-political upheaval from within the same community. They argue that there was a peasant revolt against the landlords of the Canaanite city states catalysed by a small group of former slaves from Egypt. Yahweism, with emphasis on egalitarianism, helped to unite the peasants against the landlords.

²⁰Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*....., 24-25.

Each of the three theories has its shortcomings and other theories have been suggested.²¹ Perhaps it is safe to conclude that different tribes occupied Palestine through different methods; some peacefully and others through war. Our biblical texts therefore present both methods used by Israel to get entry into Palestine.

Whichever way the Israelites occupied the land of Canaan, they eventually took control of the land and settled in. After the death of Joshua, they were ruled by a succession of judges. The judges were basically legislators and military leaders. The period of the Judges was a period when the Israelites were settling down in Canaan and trying to find their footing in their new environment.

After years of slavery and wandering in the desert they finally had their freedom; freedom to do whatever they wanted including forgetting the covenant! As a result various social ills developed and moral decadence prevailed. The story of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19 displays how low the Israelites had sunk morally. This story is just a small illustration of what the society had become. The overall picture of Israel throughout the time of the Judges was that of a society defiant to Yahweh their God. The people occasionally even switched from worshipping Yahweh to worshipping Canaanite gods.

During their time of disobedience God usually abandoned them and let their enemies defeat them. When they cried out to God however, He raised a judge who would rescue them from their enemies. A time of peace would prevail for as long as the judge lived but as soon as the judge died, Israel went back to her sinful ways and God would abandon them. The pattern would repeat itself again.

The Monarchy (1 Samuel-2 Kings)

The monarchy was the time when Israel was ruled by one king. The biblical texts, however, present a complex picture of how Israel got her first king. The books of Samuel say the last judge of Israel was Samuel. During his reign the people demanded the installation of a king. The arguments for a monarchy were several (1 Sam. 8:1ff). The Israelites longed for a king because every nation had a king. A king would judge them and lead them into battle. He would organise national resources and promote trade. But the book of 1 Samuel also shows that there were arguments against a monarchy. There was a fear that the selection of a human king signified the rejection of Yahweh as a king. A king could require taxes, force people into serfdom, institute a military and civil draft, be corrupt and abuse his power (1 Samuel 8:10-18).

Eventually Saul was anointed as Israel's first king. The circumstances of his appointment are complex. Three traditions on the appointment of Saul can be discerned from 1 Samuel. The first can be called the Samuel initiative tradition. According to this tradition found in 1 Sam. 9:1-10:16, Samuel voluntarily anointed Saul as king when Saul spent a night at his home while on a trip to find lost asses.

The second tradition, which we can call the Saul tradition, is found in 1 Sam. 11:1-15. According to this tradition, Saul was anointed king at the sanctuary of Gilgal following

²¹D.W. Baker and B. T. Arnold, *Face of Old Testament Studies: a survey of contemporary approaches*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000, 182-191.

his success in leading the Israelites army in a rescue operation in a war against the Ammonites.

The third tradition, which we can refer to as the Samuel tradition is found in 1 Sam. 7:3-11, 8:22, 10:17-27. Here Samuel did not initiate the appointment of a king. He was actually against the idea. It was the Israelite leaders who approached him in need of a king to deal with the Philistine menace. Although Samuel was against the idea, he finally bowed to the elders' pressure and at an assembly of elders at Mizpah, Saul was chosen to be king through the casting of lots.

Biblical scholars have wrestled with these traditions but no clear solution can be found. What is apparent, however, is that the idea of a king was not consensual among the Israelites. There were those who were in support and those who were against the idea. Eventually those who were in support won and Saul was appointed the first king.

Our Biblical sources, however, do not speak favourably of Saul as a king. One major reason is that our sources were edited by the Deuteronomistic editor (the third source according to Wellhausen's four documentary sources of the Pentateuch) who was more favourable to the house of David. As a result, Saul is negatively portrayed. He is more of a connection between the old order of tribal confederacy and the new order of the monarchy. He is not actually called a king (Hebrew: *melek*) but rather a prince or a leader (Hebrew: *nagid*). Saul did not develop the full arms of government. He did not have a centralised state, did not introduce taxes or a standing army, depending rather on volunteer fighters only in times of crises. It is David, his rival and successor, who achieved a centralised government.

Despite all the twists and turns of the succession history with the different members of Saul's and David's families claiming the throne, David was able to construct himself a dynasty with Jerusalem as its capital. He expanded Jerusalem, then moved the ark of the covenant to the city. The city was thus made the central place of worship for the nation of Israel and the ark a symbol of the presence of Yahweh within the city of Jerusalem. David showed interest in building a house for the ark of the covenant, but God declined. During his life David was able to keep the Philistines at bay and for some time the nation of Israel enjoyed a period of peace and stability even expanding into an empire by conquering other neighbouring states.

His rise to power showed that David was also a political and military genius. The success of David as a king could be credited to his military prowess or as some biblical scholars would have it, his scheming tactics. One thing however is clear; Yahweh had pledged his loyalty to David and David was loyal to him in return (1 Samuel 16, 18: 14, 2 Samuel 7:12, 15-6). His life, like many, was marked by many iniquities, but he was always ready to ask for forgiveness from Yahweh when he had sinned. He also helped the nation of Israel focus on the covenant it had with Yahweh. His successes despite his weaknesses are credited to Yahweh. He even appears in the Psalms as an ideal king (Psalm 89, 28-30, 2:7, 110:1-2).

David's son Solomon, Bathsheba's child, succeeded his father. The efforts of Solomon's half brother Adonijah to acclaim himself king had been frustrated by his father David through the help of Nathan the prophet and Zadok the priest. Solomon

cemented his monarchy by killing his father's rivals. He formed good public relations with the neighbouring kings, copied administrative skills from Egypt and developed trade with foreign countries. The one thing Solomon was remembered for was his wisdom and like his father he undertook impressive building projects.

His undoing was his marriage to many foreign wives who brought with them pagan practices which later infiltrated much of the nation of Israel. He also taxed his citizens heavily and conscripted them as labour for his many building projects. Towards the end of his reign he no longer had the support and loyalty of his citizens as many were disgruntled.

It was these negative policies that brought problems to his son and successor, Rehoboam. Immediately after he took up office, the elders of the ten northern tribes met with Rehoboam and demanded that he lowered the taxes and lifted the heavy labour demands his father had placed on them. Rehoboam declined this request and thus the northern kingdom revolted against the Davidic dynasty. They chose Jeroboam to be their king.

In a move to take the focus from Jerusalem as the central sanctuary of worship, Jeroboam built shrines in each of his kingdoms to serve as alternatives to Jerusalem. He placed golden calves there as a substitute for the ark, used high places of worship in local shrines and appointed non Levitical priests to replace the Levites. Finally he changed the religious calendar. Jeroboam was condemned by prophet Ahijah (1 Kings 14: 6-16).

The whole period of the monarchy, as presented in the biblical accounts, is heavily influenced by the Deuteronomistic theology. The Deuteronomist's theology had four central teachings. The true worship of God should be only in Jerusalem and so all local shrines should be destroyed. Only kings from the house of David are legitimate kings (Davidic royal ideology). Only priests from the house of Levi are legitimate priests (Levitic priesthood). Obedience to Yahweh brings rewards while disobedience brings punishment.

It is this Deuteronomistic theology that was followed in editing the books of Joshua-2 Kings. There is also a high possibility that the theology influenced some prophetic books.

Prophecy (Books of the Prophets)

Prophecy arose and flourished during the time of the monarchy. In early days the prophet was called a "seer" (1 Samuel 9:9) or a discerner (2 Samuel 24:11, Amos 7:12). However the most commonly used term in the Old Testament to refer to a prophet is *nabi* which means "one called." This implies the official standing of the one who carries the title as a spokesperson chosen or "called" by God to deliver a message in God's name.²²

Prophetic ministry is therefore one of the central themes of the Hebrew Bible. Seventeen of the thirty nine books of the Hebrew Bible belong to the genre of prophecy. Prophets usually delivered messages concerning the political and socio-economic

²² Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament*....., 182.

conditions of the day. They encouraged kings to exercise social justice and uplift covenantal values and relationship with Yahweh. In fact the message of the prophets was based on the Mosaic covenant and its laws. Their task therefore was to remind people of the Mosaic law, calling them to repentance when they went astray.

They spoke in cryptic language and the messenger formula of a prophet was usually "Thus says the Lord." (Micah 2:3). But most times they spoke a familiar language by using imagery from the context of the people. An outstanding feature of a prophet was his/her ability to predict the future. Such a message needed to come true for the prophet to maintain his/her credibility with the people. Prophets could carry out their ministries as individuals or as a band of prophets under a prophetic leader. Samuel was an example of a leader of an entourage of prophets (2 Samuel 19:20). Another was Elijah (1 Kings 18:19).

Prophets could also serve as royal servants. Good examples are Gad and Nathan who served under David and Samuel under both Saul and David. Throughout the monarchical period there are references to prophets. Elijah, Elisha and Jeremiah are among those who cannot be said to have been royal servants. They could do the will of the king but often they were in conflict with the king. The prophets represented God and the kings were, as we have discussed above, not always apt to carry out the will of God.

The Old Testament prophets have been divided into four Major Prophets and twelve Minor Prophets. This categorisation is divided yet again into the writing prophets and the preaching prophets. Scholarship generally agrees that the writing prophets came on the scene after the time of Elijah and Elisha; a few examples are Jeremiah, Isaiah and Hosea.

The books of the prophets provide a window into the history of Israel from pre-exilic to exilic times. The rise of prophets like Amos is associated with the rise to power of Assyria around the eighth century BCE. As a super power, Assyria made many kingdoms including Israel its vassals. Prophets who were active around that period were Amos and Hosea in Israel and Isaiah and Micah in Judah. Any king who tried to revolt against Assyria faced severe punishment; whole villages or cities were deported to other neighbouring countries or were killed. The prophets of those days had to remind people of the promises of God in those circumstances.

Amos, for example, felt that the occupation of Israel by Assyria was no mistake, but punishment from God for Israel's sinfulness and unfaithfulness to the covenant. Hosea preached the same type of message, a message of judgement and return to the covenantal values. Hosea predicted the fall of Israel (the northern kingdom) which came about in 722 BCE when Assyria invaded the kingdom and took some Israelites into Assyrian exile.

The Assyrian power soon faded and the next world power was Babylon. With the fall of Assyria, Judah changed masters yet again. First they succumbed to Egypt and later found themselves under Babylonian rule. Many high standing citizens were carried away into exile and artefacts and decorations of gold and silver were taken from the temple.

The ruler of Babylon at the time was Nebuchadnezzar. When he took the leading citizens into exile, Nebuchadnezzar placed Zedekiah as the king of Judah. He was the uncle of the actual king, Jehoiachin whom Nebuchadnezzar took into exile. Zedekiah later tried to revolt by allying himself with Egypt. This time Babylon showed no mercy to Judah. All the cities of Judah were captured, more people were taken into exile and some of the few left behind starved to death. The city of Jerusalem was under siege for close to two years. The city wall was pulled down and worst of all, the temple was levelled to the ground. Despite the nation's rebellion against God this was a very hard blow to the people. The very symbol of what made them Israelite was reduced to rubble. Prophets kept calling the people to covenantal fidelity. Jeremiah was active prior to and during the exile. Ezekiel was his contemporary. The exile and the destruction of the temple were a wake-up call to the later generation of the Israelites who were the first group to be regarded as Jews. With the help and support of the Persian King Cyrus, the group that went into exile and the remnant who were left during the exile rebuilt the temple. Ezra, a returning exile and a priest who was a descendant of Aaron and Zadok called the people to purity. He convinced the Israelite men who had married Gentile wives to leave or divorce them. This was a harsh move but he strongly felt that they led the Jewish people to pagan faiths and practices.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the major themes found in the Hebrew Bible. Our approach has been to discuss them in terms of their historicity and theology. The discussion has shown that the Israelites attached theological significance to the events in their history although some of these events contained in the Hebrew Bible books lack evidence outside the Bible itself. Theirs is therefore a history of God's intervention in their lives and it is in this sense that the themes need to be understood.

In discussing the themes of the Old Testament it has emerged that Israel shared certain experiences and practices with her contemporaries. However, what distinguished her from other nations was her conviction that God was operative in her life especially following his direct intervention in liberating them from Egyptian slavery. It is this understanding of their relationship with God that defines the character of the various themes of the Old Testament. The beliefs, the practices, the rituals, ceremonies and festivals, the fortunes and misfortunes are all understood in light of Israel's relationship with her personal God.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Survey of the New Testament

Lovemore Togarasei,

Introduction

The place of the New Testament (or the Bible in general) in African Christianity cannot be overemphasized. Writing about the place of the Bible in Africa, South African theologian, Gerald O. West says, “— the Bible is meaning and powerful both opened and closed.”¹

Indeed the Bible is used in all spheres of African life. Statements or teachings supported by biblical passages are considered more authoritative. Even in political discourses it is not uncommon to hear people quoting from the Bible. Knowledge of the Bible and particularly the New Testament is therefore indispensable in Africa. This chapter surveys the New Testament (NT). It serves as a good introduction not only for those who want to study the Bible academically but even for those who want to read it for devotional purposes. There are various ways of studying the NT. First is a synthetic approach where one takes an overview of the NT as a whole in order to gain its overall message. Second is an analytic approach where one makes an in-depth analysis of the various verses that make up the books of the NT. A third is the thematic approach where one focuses on the various themes of the NT. These three are the most common approaches.

As this chapter is mainly meant for those beginning NT studies, we find the synthetic approach appropriate for our purposes. It enables the beginner to grasp the whole picture of NT studies thereby providing the stepping-stones for further studies. The chapter is divided into seven sections. The first section discusses the meaning, origin and world of the NT. It is followed by a discussion of the methods used to interpret the NT. The third section discusses the origins and purposes of the four gospels including the Acts of the Apostles. The fourth section focuses on the Pauline letters. It is followed by a discussion of the Deutro-Pauline and the Pastoral letters. Section six looks at the Catholic letters. The final section discusses the apocalyptic book of Revelation. It is not possible to consider all the books of the NT in detail

¹Gerald. O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a dialogical reading of the Bible*, Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2003:vii.

because of the limitations of space. For each category of books we shall therefore just select one book and discuss it in the light of the whole category.

The Meaning, Origin and World of the New Testament

Meaning

The NT is the second part of the Christian Bible, which is generally divided into the Old and the New Testaments. The word ‘testament’ is derived from the Greek word *diatheke*, which means covenant, will or agreement. The concept of covenants is well known in Africa. The Shona of Zimbabwe call it *sungano*, the Zulu/Ndebele of South Africa/Zimbabwe call it *isivumilano* while the Tswana of Botswana call it *kolagano*.

In all cases covenants hold sacrality and cannot be broken without serious consequences. The two Bible covenants hold the same meaning. Whereas the old covenant (the OT) is about God’s dealings with the Jews, the new covenant (the NT) is about God’s dealings with the whole of humanity. NT study therefore covers the history of God’s dealings with people during the formation and early development of Christianity.

Origin

The twenty-seven books that now make our NT were not the only books written and used in the early church. There were many books in circulation before the early church settled for these twenty-seven as its canon. The process by which the NT books were accepted as authoritative while other books were rejected is known as canonisation. The Greek word *kanon* was formed from the Hebrew *kaneh* which means a reed or a rod used for measurement or alignment. The early church first used the word with reference to rule or norm (Gal. 6:16 and 2Cor.10:13-16). Later it referred to the official list of books it recognised as authoritative in its teaching and practice. The canonisation of the NT was a long and probably corrupt process that took almost four centuries. But what were the reasons for the canonisation of the NT?

What the church now possesses the 27 books as the “New Testament” to which it refers on matters of its life and thought is something that the early church never thought of. The present canon rose out of specific internal and external forces that pushed the church to define a canon. Among the many intrinsic factors was the death of the apostles who were the witnesses to the words and deeds of Jesus. There was therefore need to record the Jesus tradition before it was forgotten completely. This led to the production of some books, a first step towards the canonisation of the NT.

Extrinsic factors, however, pushed the church into developing its own canon. The rise of Marcionism, Gnosticism and Montanism acted as a catalyst for the canonisation of the NT.² The teachings of these movements were contrary to the teaching of the church. Marcion in particular forced the church to move fast in canonising its scriptures when he produced his own canon which had the gospel of Luke and ten letters of

²See H.Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*, USA: Fortress Press, 1985:15; E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1987, for explanation of these.

Paul. Soon after Marcion's canon, church leaders began to issue lists of writings that could be read by their communities.

The earliest such list is the Muratorian Canon discovered in a library in Milan in 1740 by Lodovico Antonio Muratori, after whom it was named. It was produced towards the end of the 2nd century as a response to Marcion's canon (thus is also called Anti-Marcionite canon). This canon had the four gospels, Acts of the Apostles, 13 letters of Paul that include the Pastoral letters, 1 and 2 John, Wisdom of Solomon and two apocalypses, Revelations of John and Peter.

Various other church leaders also issued canonical lists. It was, however, Athanasius the bishop of Alexandria who in 367 CE listed the books of the NT in his Festal letter as we have them today. But this did not stop the issuing of other lists. Athanasius' canon, however, continued gaining popularity among many churches. Under Augustine of Hippo in Africa, three church councils in northern Africa (393, 397 and 419) declared these twenty-seven books the only canonical scriptures. Africans can therefore be credited for coming up with the NT canon.

What criteria did the early church use to accept or reject books from the Christian canon? The church did not sit down with clearly defined criteria to choose books for canonisation. However, based on the content of the books that finally made it into the NT, it appears certain tests were developed for the acceptance of the books. Was the book written by a disciple or an immediate disciple of an apostle? Did the book adhere to/was it consistent with the teaching of the church? In other words, the doctrine in a book to be canonised was supposed to be consistent with what was known of God in the OT and in the teaching and writings of the apostles. Did the book have evidence of divine inspiration? Was it widely received by the churches?

From the foregoing discussion of the origin of the NT, it can be seen that there were many factors that pushed the church to produce its own scripture. The church's needs and challenges determined the process and content of the canon. Should canonisation then not be an open and continuous process? In the 1990s C.S. Banana, the late Zimbabwean theologian, called for the rewriting of the Bible for it to have an African voice.³ Many other Christians are asking whether the Bible is still speaking the same message to us as it spoke two centuries ago. Should we not update the Christian canon for it to address issues such as terror, HIV/AIDS, economic structural adjustments, globalisation and African underdevelopment?

The World

Before surveying the NT, it is also important to get a general picture of what the political, philosophical and religious world was like when Jesus, the focus of the NT, came on the scene and when the church was sent out into the world. Unfortunately space does not allow us to say much on each of these NT presuppositions.

³C.S. Banana, 'Rewriting the Bible,' in I. Mukonyora, J. Cox and F. Vestrtraen (Eds.), *"Rewriting" the Bible : the real issues: perspectives from within biblical and religious studies in Zimbabwe*, Gweru : Mambo Press, 1993.

Although the books of the NT were written in different parts of the Roman world, they reported and responded to a story that began in Palestine. Politically, the NT world was a Graeco-Roman world. Not only was the NT produced in the Graeco-Roman world, it assumes this Graeco-Roman culture and was even written in *Koine* Greek, which had become the *lingua franca* (common language in the same way English is today) of the day. But how did the Greeks and Romans come to influence the NT?

The latest books of the OT show Jews under the Persians. The Persians defeated the Babylonians who had taken Judah into exile and under King Cyrus, allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem in 537BCE. The Persian Empire lasted from 539 to 330BCE and so the Jews enjoyed two centuries of relative peace and stability.

Conditions changed towards the end of the fourth century BCE with the rise of Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great created the Graeco-Roman world. Born in 356BCE to King Philip II of the Macedonians, he was brought up under the tutelage of the famous Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Probably due to Aristotle's influence, Alexander loved Greek culture greatly. In 336BCE he succeeded his father as king after his assassination. His aim was to unite the Eastern and the Western worlds under Greek culture. He quickly overran Greece to the south and drove his army along the coastal plains of modern day Turkey into Palestine and Egypt. In 334BCE he marched into the heart of the Persian Empire where he overthrew the Persian king, Darius III at the battle of Issus.

Alexander went on to create the largest empire the world has yet known. To keep this great empire intact, he introduced Greek culture to all his subjects. 19th century historians have called this Greek culture Hellenism after the Greek word for Greece, *Hellas*. According to 2 Maccabees 4:10-17, Hellenism had five main features: the use of the Greek language, participation in Greek gymnasiums, participation at points of social contact in the gymnasiums, participation in Greek stadiums and participation in Greek theatrical representations. Alexander's reign was short-lived as he died in 323BCE. However, the impact of his policies was felt for a long time.

In 63BCE the Romans brought Greek rule in Palestine to an end. Roman rule was a blessing to Christianity in a number of ways. First, the Romans were known for their insistence on law and order. In fact, laws in many countries including many African countries are based on the Roman-Dutch law, which goes back to the time of the Roman Empire. Second, the Romans were generally tolerant to religious diversity. This tolerance gave opportunity to the spread of Christianity.

Further, the Romans built a network of roads. With the protection provided by her army that often patrolled the roads, this contributed greatly to free movement within the empire. They also made sea travel safe by putting an end to sea piracy. Rome's system of government brought in a great time of peace and prosperity, making the Roman Empire a safe place to live and travel. This period is called "*Pax Romana*," the peace of Rome (27 B.C.– A.D. 180).

The world from which the NT was born was also rich in philosophy and religion. It is therefore important for a student of the NT to be aware of some of the philosophi-

cal and religious movements which are presupposed by NT writings. Philosophy literally means love of wisdom. It is an attempt to understand all existing knowledge about this world in a systematic way, including the purpose of human existence. Philosophy began among the Greeks. It shaped educational standards throughout the Roman-Graeco world. Even today a huge vocabulary of scientific, religious and philosophical terms is in Greek language. Various philosophies, like Platonism, Stoicism, Aristotleanism and Epicureanism arose as people tried to provide answers to human existence and problems.

A number of religions had their home in the Graeco-Roman world. Some religions like Gnosticism emphasised the attainment of knowledge for salvation while others such as the mystery religions emphasised mysteries. Some religions were also based on the reading of stars as by horoscopes today and so were called astral religions. Although some of these religions could have had an impact on the beliefs and practices of the writers of the NT books, it is Judaism which had a direct influence.

Although Judaism had some common features that set it apart from other cults, Jews did not all agree on every major aspect of their religion; neither did they engage in the same religious practices. They all believed in the one true God, upheld the centrality of the temple in Jerusalem and observed the three main annual festivals: the Pentecost, the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles.

However, their different understandings of their faith and duty led to the formation of the parties or sects which were common during Jesus' time. Four major groups, the Pharisees, Sadducces, Essenes and Zealots are discussed by Josephus, the first century Jewish historian. It should, however, be stated right here that not all Jews belonged to the groups that Josephus mentioned, just as not everyone in a country belongs to a political party or religious group. There were in fact, many more people who were not affiliated to any religious sect than there were those affiliated. Those unaffiliated were known by the Pharisees as the People of the Land.

Approaching NT Studies: Methodological Tools

For any task to be properly undertaken one must have the right tools. The same applies to the task of studying the NT. Biblical scholars often mention the interpretative triangle when discussing the need for methodological tools in biblical studies. This triangle is made up of the author, the text and the reader. We should bear in mind that the texts of the NT were written more than two centuries ago to address specific needs of the time.

The NT (or the whole Bible) has power to generate new values, communities and understandings. Given also that it can be used as a tool to oppress and liberate, to bless or to curse, to build or to destroy, proper interpretive tools become more than necessary. Yes, others believe the Bible to be timeless, however, we need to have a proper understanding of it before we start using it in the present context. This section therefore looks at some of the methods used to interpret the NT.

The area of NT methodology is also called NT criticism and falls within the broad field of Biblical criticism. 'Biblical criticism' is not used to find faults in the Bible as

many who first hear the phrase think. It means, simply, a close reading of the Bible bearing in mind that the Bible itself is a 'human' product. By 'human' we are not rejecting the divine nature of the Bible. We mean that, while God inspired the writers, the writers were human beings who expressed what they 'heard' from God in human terms for the Bible to be understood by humans.

NT methodology generally takes this approach. F.F. Sergovia uses the word 'diversity' to describe the field of NT methodology.⁴ Indeed there are now so many methods used to interpret NT books that 'diversity' is the best way to talk about this field. These many methods can, however, be put into two groups: traditional and modern methods. This method of categorization is very subjective but for those beginning NT studies we find it fitting.

Traditional methods are mainly historical and they dominated NT studies from the beginning of the academic study of the Bible in the early nineteenth century up to the 1970s. Quite influential was the historical-critical method, which encompasses source/literary, form and redaction criticisms. Other historical approaches included textual criticism, comparative method, redaction and composition criticism.

All these methods emphasised the gap between the text and the reader and therefore the need for the reader not to read his/her modern ideas into the text (*eisegesis*) but for her/him to be guided by these methods to draw meaning out of the text (*exegesis*). These methods are still very important for NT studies today although we have called them 'traditional' methods.

The modern methods, on the other hand, beginning roughly in the 1970s, arose as some scholars were expressing dissatisfaction with the traditional methods. Among other reasons, they argued that the historical approach to the NT took readers back to the period of writing of the books without saying much to the reader today. In an attempt to have the text and reader meet together, new methods were borrowed from other academic disciplines.

Literary criticism came in mainly from literature with methods like structuralism, narrative criticism, deconstruction, rhetorical criticism and reader-response criticism. From the social sciences came social-scientific criticism in its various arrays. There are also a number of cultural approaches which approach the NT from the point of view of the marginalised: women, minority groups and generally the non-Western community; what some can call two-thirds world.⁵

Let us conclude this section by pointing out that the appropriateness of any chosen tool depends on the task to be undertaken and that in most cases, to do a 'good' job one needs to use as many tools as are available.

⁴F.F. Sergovia, 'Methods for the study of the New Testament,' in M.A. Powell, (Ed) *The New Testament Today*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.

⁵M.W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000:

The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles

The NT contains four books called gospels. The word gospel is from the old English '*godspel*' which means good news. It translates the Greek word *euangelion* with the same meaning. That the gospels contain good news is reflected in the opening of the gospel of Mark (Mark 1:1). The four gospels (Matt., Mark, Luke and John) bear the 'good news' of the story of Jesus.

Of these four gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke have since 1776 been called the 'synoptic gospels' by J. J. Griesbach.⁶ Synoptic is from two Greek words which mean to view together or to see something from the same point of view. The synoptic gospels are so-called because they tell the story of Jesus from the same basic point of view. The sequence of the life and ministry of Jesus, the content and sometimes the wording of these gospels have similarities for which we shall try to account.

John, on the other hand, stands separately from the synoptic gospels. Its sequence of the ministry of Jesus is different. There is more emphasis on the theological meaning of the life and teaching of Jesus than we find in the synoptics.

The Synoptic Gospels and the Synoptic Problem

We have pointed out that Matthew, Mark and Luke are called synoptic gospels because of the similar way in which they present the story of Jesus. However, apart from these similarities there are also many differences. It is the existence of these similarities and differences, which then brings about what has been called the synoptic problem. Why are the three books so similar and yet so different?

Over the many years of the critical study of the gospels, scholars have propounded a number of theories in an attempt to solve the synoptic problem.⁷ Many of these theories have long been discarded. The four-source theory has enjoyed support from many scholars as a solution to the problem. This theory is also called utilisation or dependency theory. It argues that based on the verbatim agreement among the three gospels, the likely explanation is that one gospel was written first and the other two made use of it in compiling their own gospels.

In the 5th century, Augustine of Hippo reiterated the old theory that this first gospel was the gospel of Matthew. He argued that after Matthew wrote his gospel Mark then abbreviated it to produce his own gospel and then Luke made use of both Matthew and Mark to write his gospel. This is the argument which influenced the arrangement of these gospels in the NT.

The utilisation theory was popularised in academic circles by J.J. Griesbach in his 1789 publication. Griesbach, however, slightly altered the order arguing that Matthew's gospel was followed by that of Luke and Mark summarised both Matthew and Luke to produce his gospel. Most scholars, however, disagreed with the priority of Matthew finding no reason why Mark would have left out important stories like the birth of Jesus

⁶G. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁷See W. G. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, London: SCM Press, 1975 for some of the theories which have been suggested.

if he wrote after Matthew and Luke. Because of this in 1835 Karl Lachmann suggested the priority of Mark, a theory which seems to have won the hearts of many in NT scholarship.

Various reasons have been given to support the priority of Mark. For example, in terms of subject matter, it has been observed that Matthew has 600 verses (90%) of Mark's 660 verses. Luke on the other hand has 350 (51%) of Mark's verses. Thus combined, Matthew and Luke have more than 90% of Mark's subject matter. On the basis of this and many other arguments, the majority of scholars are now in agreement that Mark was the first gospel to be written.

Although the priority of Mark marked a step towards solving the synoptic problem, more questions remained unanswered. There is a lot of material in Matthew and Luke which is not found in Mark. In fact, between Matthew and Luke there are 200-250 verses not found in Mark but common to the two. Thus in 1863, H.J. Holtzmann suggested what came to be known as the two documentary hypothesis. He said that apart from using Mark, Matthew and Luke had another written source which he called Q. Q is the first letter of the German word *Quelle* which means source. All the material common to Matthew and Luke and not found in Mark then must have been drawn from this source.

The two documentary theory again did not solve the synoptic problem. It did not explain the source of the material found in Matthew only or Luke only. The stories of the appearance of the angel to Zechariah (Luke 1:5) and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:38), as examples, are only found in the gospel of Luke. Thus in 1924, B. H. Streeter suggested the four documentary hypothesis. He suggested that apart from using Mark and Q, Matthew and Luke had each his own independent source. He called these sources M and L for the Matthean special source and the Lukan special source respectively. The four documentary hypothesis thus explained the relationship of the synoptic gospels in terms of the sources used by the writers.

Authorship of the Gospels

Although all our gospels now bear superscriptions mentioning the names of the authors, these are later church additions. All the gospels were originally written anonymously, that is, without references to the names of the authors. It is the early church which attributed names of authors to the gospels.

In the case of the second gospel, the early church believed the gospel was written by John Mark, the son of Mary of Jerusalem, in whose house the early church met (Acts 12:12). The early church also linked Mark with Peter (1 Peter 5:13). Mark could have been his secretary or have interpreted Peter's sermons from Aramaic to Greek.

Beginning in the second century, the first gospel began to be linked with the name of Matthew (also called Levi), one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. Before he followed Jesus he was a tax collector (Matthew 9:9; Luke 5:27). The early church believed he was the first evangelist to write a gospel. It was believed that the gospel was first written in Hebrew, most likely Aramaic as it is the language that Jesus himself spoke.

The Gospel was later translated into Greek as the church expanded into the Hellenistic world.

Tradition associated the third Gospel and Acts of the Apostles with Luke, the companion of Paul, a doctor by profession. There is mention of Luke as a physician and companion of Paul in Philemon 24, Colossians 4:14 and 2 Timothy 4:11. That this physician was the author of the third Gospel was later supported by scholars like W.K. Hobart. They argued for the existence of technical medical language in passages like Luke 4:38; 5:12; 7:15; 8:44; Acts 5:5; 12:23.

As for the fourth gospel, tradition attributed it to the 'beloved disciple' on the basis of chapter 21. This disciple is also mentioned in three other passages (John 13:23-15, 19:26ff, 20:2-8). From the end of the second century C.E., the tradition began to grow, beginning with Irenaeus, that this beloved disciple was John, the son of Zebedee. This tradition also attributed to this author the three Johannine letters and Revelation. It was reasonable to suggest a name from the inner circle disciples of Jesus; Peter, James and John. Peter is mentioned in the context of the beloved disciple and Acts says James was martyred early in the history of Christianity, so John remained the only possible candidate.

However, the majority of modern scholars now reject what the early church said about the authors of the gospels. They note that there is no evidence that the gospels were written by apostles or immediate disciples of the apostles. On the basis of these arguments, it is safe to conclude that the authors of the gospels are not known.

The Dates of the Gospels

Just as we do not know the authors of the gospels, the dates cannot be established with authenticity. For Mark both external and internal evidence show that the gospel was written in the 60s CE. A date in the 60s is confirmed by internal evidence of references to persecutions (Mark 8:34; 9:31 etc) and controversies surrounding the issue of Gentile freedom (Mark 7:17-23; 13:10) However, 13:14 is considered to be the enigmatic verse. In fact the whole of chapter 13 is believed by many to have been written in the light of the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem by the Roman army under General Titus in 70 C.E. We therefore conclude that the gospel of Mark must have been written between 65 and 70 C.E.

To arrive at a date for Matthew there are a number of considerations. Interpretation of texts like Matthew 22:7 show that Matthew must have had the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in mind. The picture of the church reflected in the gospel points to a date between 80 and 100 C.E. The dating of recently discovered manuscripts of this gospel has not helped much and so it is better to put the book towards the end of the first century. At that point there was a developed church order (16:19) with structures for solving conflicts (18:15-17). The existence of persecution (24:9), dissension (24:16), false prophets (24:11), the emergence of the doctrine of trinity (28:19) and the fading of the hope of the parousia (10:23) all point to a date towards the last quarter of the first century.

The date of Luke is also not obvious. In fact the dates which have been suggested for this gospel range from 60 to 130 C.E. Those who suggest an early date argue that since Luke did not mention the death of Paul in Acts, both books were written before Paul's death. On the other hand those who advocate for a late date base this on similarities between Luke and the writings of Justin, who wrote in the second century. All these suggestions are possible but a close look at Luke's sources and theology favours a date between 70 and 90 C.E. Based on this, the most likely date is between 80 and 85.

On the basis of the theology of the gospel of John, it is dated between the end of the first century and the beginning of the second.

The Purpose of the Gospels

To find out the purpose of the gospels, we need first to be aware that gospels were not meant to serve biographical interests. In other words, the evangelists' objectives were not writing a life of Jesus for historical purposes. This does not necessarily mean that there is no history in the gospels. Rather, whatever history is there was meant to serve a particular interest to the author and his/her community. We therefore should think of each evangelist as a pastor in his community, using the story of Jesus to address specific needs of his community. Each gospel was written in specific circumstances and against a specific background. Let us use the gospel of Mark to demonstrate this.

To find the purpose of Mark we must seek the circumstances in which it was written. Christian tradition and modern scholarship place the writing of Mark during a period of Christian persecution. Thus Mark's main purpose must have been to address this problem. For T.J. Weeden, Mark had to create a kind of drama in which he (Mark) represented the Jesus tradition and his community represented the disciples' tradition. Thus he entitled his book, *Mark: Traditions in conflict*.⁸

The conflict begins in 8:27 where, after Jesus asked his disciples who people thought he was, Peter confessed that he was Christ, the son of the living God. Peter's confession represented the popular triumphalistic view of the Messiah as the one who would defeat Israel's enemies and make the Jews a super power. The Messiah was seen as a political figure. Following this Christology, the followers of Jesus were also supposed to be victorious over their enemies. As followers of a victorious Christ, they believed they were also to be victorious disciples. To explain why his community was suffering, Mark wrote against this *theologiae gloriae* (theology of glory). He introduced *theologiae crucis* (theology of the cross).

For him, the Christology of Jesus was that of suffering. Thus after Peter's confession, Jesus introduced the theme of suffering (8:31; 9:31; 10:33). In fact he called the popular view of messiahship 'satanic' (8:33). Throughout the gospel the emphasis is therefore on suffering. Soon after starting his ministry, Jesus is threatened with death (2:1-3:6). Jesus himself seems to be in a hurry to go to Jerusalem and die. Mark implies this by using the word immediately (1:10, 12, 20, 21, 23, 29, etc).

⁸T.J. Weeden, *Mark: Traditions in conflict*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.

Jesus, in Mark, is more of a human than a divine being (6:5-6; 13:32; 15:31). He gets tired and sleeps and gets hungry. Mark finds the title "Son of man" the most appropriate title for Jesus (8:31; 9:31; 10:33, 45).⁹ It meant son of a human being and emphasised his humanity. The outline of the gospel itself also shows that Mark emphasised the suffering of Jesus. Of the sixteen chapters of the gospel six chapters concern the passion of Jesus. Interestingly these chapters relate only one week of Jesus' year long ministry. It is for this reason that Martin Kahler called this gospel a Passion story with an extended introduction.¹⁰ By emphasising suffering Christology, Mark wanted to teach his readers that discipleship also entails suffering. This message would have surely served well in a community that was experiencing suffering.

Other gospel writers (evangelists) had their own interests. Matthew probably sought to prove that Christianity was the fulfilment of Judaism. On the other hand it appears Luke wanted to show the universal character of Jesus' gospel. Lastly, the gospel of John appears to have been written to a community of people with various backgrounds, former disciples of John the Baptist, Samaritans, Jews and disciples of Jesus.¹¹ The author therefore wrote to unify this community.

Acts of the Apostles: Authorship, Date and Place of Writing

Generally scholars agree that the author of Luke also wrote the book of Acts. There is substantial evidence to support this. The most direct evidence comes from the prefaces of each book Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-2). Both prefaces are addressed to Theophilus, the author's patron or a cover name for the Christian community being addressed. The preface of Acts also explicitly refers to "my former book." Furthermore, there are linguistic and theological similarities between the two works, suggesting that they have a common author. As to who this author was, our conclusion on the author of the third gospel also suffices here.

As for the date of writing, scholars generally believe that it must not be far from the date of writing of Luke. Traditionally an early date in the 60s was given on the basis that the author does not mention the death of Paul. This position is no longer accepted because of the theology of the book, which points to the end of the first century. We therefore should put the date of this book between 85 and 100 C.E. The place of writing cannot be ascertained but any place in the Greek-speaking world, particularly around the Aegean Sea is possible.

The Purpose of Acts

Of all the books of the NT, Acts appears more historical. However, modern scholarship has tended to question the validity of Acts as history. They have observed that the author did not follow methods of historiography. For example, the many direct speeches

⁹M.D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark: A study of the background to the term "Son of Man" and its use in St Mark's Gospel*, Montreal, McGill University Press, 1967.

¹⁰M. Kahler cited by R.P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations Vol. 1*, Exeter: Paternoster, 1975.

¹¹R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979.

given in the book have led scholars to question how the author collected them in a world that did not have recording devices. The book of Acts also has many historical gaps. Indeed others have asked whether the title 'Acts of the Apostles' is appropriate considering that the book focuses on two apostles, Peter (Acts 1-12) and Paul (Acts 13-28). Should it not be called Acts of Peter and Paul or Acts/Gospel of the Holy Spirit considering the centrality of the Holy Spirit in the book?

Pointing out one single purpose of Acts is difficult. Although the book is not history in the modern sense of the word, there is surely a lot to learn about the history of the church in it. The author told the story of the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to the heart of the Roman Empire. In doing so he could have been apologetic as some have suggested. He wanted to show that Christianity did not threaten the Roman Empire in any way. He also wanted to show the continuing presence of Jesus among his followers in the form of the Holy Spirit.

Thus it is best to conclude that Acts was meant to serve a theological purpose. In that way we can understand why he differs with Paul (in Paul's letters) in some areas. We can also understand the long speeches in the light of the theological needs they had to serve.

The Pauline Letters: Focus on First Corinthians

Of the 27 books of the NT 13 claim Pauline authorship. This makes Paul the greatest witness to the Christ event in the NT writings. Modern scholars, no longer accept that all the 13 letters were written by Paul. Only seven (Rom., 1 Cor., 2 Cor., Gal., Phil., 1Thess. and Phim.) are considered to have been written by Paul. They are called genuine/authentic/undisputed/proto-Pauline letters.

2 Thess., Col. and Eph. are no longer accepted as primarily Pauline letters. Rather, someone else wrote them later in the name of Paul. They are now referred to as Deutro (Secondary)-Pauline letters. As for 1 and 2 Tim. and Tit. these are believed to have been written many years after Paul and are now referred to as Pastoral letters because of their pastoral concerns.

Questions have been raised on the form of these Pauline writings. The main question has been whether the writings are letters or epistles. A. Deissmann has treated this question in detail. We treat the writings as letters following Deissmann's definition of a letter as, "a means of communicating information between a writer and a real correspondent separated by distance between each other."¹² As letters, the writings of Paul were strictly occasional, not systematic theological treatises.

Paul wrote responding to concrete situations in the communities he had established. One of Paul's strategies in nursing communities he had established was to keep in touch with them through letters. Thus to understand each letter we need to consider its background, looking at Paul's dealings with the community, the date and place of writing and the circumstances that gave rise to the writing of the letter. Without this

¹²A. Deissmann as quoted by R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York: Doubleday, 1997, 410.

background, there is a danger of reading the letters out of their context which has sometimes led to the abuse of the Bible. For purposes of space we shall discuss one letter, First Corinthians.

The Founding of the Church of Corinth

Paul arrived in the city of Corinth on his own having sent Timothy and Silas to Macedonia while he was in Athens. On his arrival, it appears, he was hosted by a Jewish couple, Priscilla and Aquilla. Originally from Pontus, the couple had recently been in Rome. Following disturbances among the Jews, Emperor Claudius, in about 49CE, expelled the Jews from Rome forcing Aquilla and Priscilla to go to Corinth. Immediately Paul started working with this couple as a tent maker. It appears the couple had already converted to Christianity.

When Timothy and Silas arrived, Paul together with Aquilla and Priscilla started teaching the Jews and Gentiles in the synagogue and in their private houses. Possibly because of their success in winning converts, opposition grew as tended to happen everywhere they went. Paul was forced to move from the synagogue to the house of Titius Justus, a Gentile formerly interested in synagogue worship. Paul continued preaching there while working for his companions' sustenance (Acts 18:2; 1Cor. 4:12; 2Cor. 11:7). They even won to Christianity Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue.

After staying for more than one and a half years they left, leaving a flourishing Christian community which was made up of Jews (Acts 18:4; 1Cor. 7:18) and Gentiles (1Cor. 12:2). The community included both the poor (1Cor. 1:26) and the rich (1 Cor. 11:21; Acts 18:8). It seems Apollos, a learned Alexandrian Jew, remained in charge of the congregation when Paul and company left.

Date and Place of Writing

The letter we call first Corinthians was not Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. 1 Cor. 5:9 shows that he had already written a letter to the Corinthians. However, before he wrote our present 1Cor., Paul sent Timothy from Ephesus through Macedonia to Corinth (4:17, 16:10 and Acts 19:22). Meanwhile he wrote a letter which he sent directly in order to solve the grave problems that were rocking the church. The place of writing therefore is Ephesus (16:8).

Since Paul sent several greetings from the churches of Asia (16:19), it appears he wrote this letter after staying in Ephesus for a long time. 4:18 also shows that Paul had not been in Corinth for some time and so he was thinking of a visit there for the whole winter (16:6). Thus this letter was written in spring prior to the end of his stay in Ephesus (16:8). The exact year is difficult to establish but it is safe to conclude that the letter was written between 54 and 57, the years that Paul spent at Ephesus.

The Occasion of the Letter

While at Ephesus Paul learnt about the situation in the church of Corinth from three sources. First, Chloe's (1:11) people brought reports of the situation in Corinth. We

know nothing about Chloe although some people suggest that she may have been a woman of Corinth or Ephesus who had representatives who travelled between the two cities for business or for family reasons.¹³

The second source of information about the Corinthians came to Paul through three men who came from Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:15ff). They are likely to be the people who brought the letter mentioned in 1 Cor. 7:1, which served as Paul's third source of information about the situation in Corinth. With the information from these sources, Paul set out to address the problems in Corinth.

Major Themes

The major themes of this letter come from Paul's response to the problems the Corinthians were experiencing. These included factionalism/divisions in church (1-4), sexual immorality (5: 1-13 and 6:12-20), lawsuits (6:1-11), sex and/in marriage (7), food offered to idols (8:1-11:1), head covering in worship (11:2-16), divisions at the Eucharist (11:17-34), spiritual gifts (12-14), the resurrection of the dead (15) and collections for Christians in Jerusalem. The last chapter contains greetings (16).

There is no doubt that Corinth must have been one of the hot spots of the Pauline churches. The problems, however serve troubled communities very well today. The multiethnic, multiracial and cross-cultural problems Paul addressed in this community are illuminating in our present context.

The Deutro-Pauline and Pastoral Letters

Deutro is a Greek word which means second or secondary. Therefore Deutro-Pauline letters are secondary Pauline letters; letters believed to have been written by disciples of Paul in Paul's name but long after his death. In other words these are pseudonymous letters, letters written under a false name. There are many such pseudonymous letters in the New Testament but those that fall under Deutro-Pauline letters would be 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Today, however, scholars remove the last three from the Deutro-Pauline letters and refer to them as the Pastoral letters.

Deutro-Pauline Letters:

Reasons for Denying the Letters Pauline Authorship

The Deutro-Pauline letters differ from Pauline letters in style and vocabulary. For example, the Deutro-Pauline letters have long sentences (Eph. 1:3-14 and Col. 1:3-8, 2:8-15; 2 Thess. 1:3-12) contrary to Paul's style of writing. In terms of vocabulary, Colossians has 87 words that do not appear in undisputed-Pauline letters. Of these 34 are not found anywhere in the NT. Some characteristic Pauline words like law, freedom, justification are also missing in these letters. Ephesians also uses a number of words not found in the NT or found in the NT but not in Pauline letters. In fact over 90

¹³F.V. Filson, *A New Testament History*, London: SCM Press, 1965, 250.

words are not found in the genuine-Pauline letters. For example, Ephesians uses the title '*diabolos*' in reference to the devil whereas Paul used 'Satan'.

The theology of Deutro-Pauline letters also differs from that of Paul in a number of ways. The Christology (teaching about Christ), ecclesiology (teaching about the church) and eschatology (teaching about the end of the world) of the Deutro-Pauline letters are much more developed than those in the undisputed Pauline letters. There are many other differences between the Deutro-Pauline and the genuine Pauline letters all of which show that the Deutro-Pauline letters were not written by Paul.

We must, however, point out that the argument against Pauline authorship cannot be based on any one of the points we mentioned above. It is the accumulated evidence that convinces most NT scholars that the letters were not written by Paul but by an admirer(s) of Paul who knew a great deal of Pauline correspondence.

Date and Place of Writing

Because of the pseudonymous nature of the letters, there is no way of knowing the exact dates and places of writing. As to the dates, the change in eschatology and the mention of false teachers in these letters would suggest dates near the end of the first century C.E. The place of writing is very difficult to ascertain although some suggest Ephesus in the case of Ephesians and Colossians.

Major Themes of the Deutro-Pauline Letters

In 2 Thessalonians the author did not pursue specific themes. Only his teaching about the parousia (the second coming of Jesus) stands out (2:1-5). It appears the community still misunderstood Paul's eschatology or they had received some letter or teaching that the parousia had already come (2:2). As a response the author set out what many interpreters have called an apocalyptic timetable.

In Colossians three major themes are discernible: the supremacy of Christ (1:15-20) false teaching and household ethics (3-4).

Apart from the address and the conclusion, Ephesians has two major themes almost similar to those of Colossians that some scholars think these two are different versions of the same letter. The two themes are: the unity of the church in Christ (1-3) and ethical admonitions for those living in the world (4-6).

The Pastoral Letters

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus have been called Pastoral letters since the 18th century because they were addressed to pastors, Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in the island of Crete. They deal with pastoral issues. Both Timothy and Titus were well-known co-workers of Paul.

Timothy was a native of Lystra, son of a Gentile father and a Jewish mother, Eunice (Acts 16:1, 2 Timothy 1:5). His grand mother's name was Lois and like his mother she was a Christian (2 Tim. 1:5). Timothy was, no doubt, Paul's most trusted companion (Acts 17:14f, 18:5, 19:22, 1 Thess. 1:1, 2 Cor. 1:1 and Phil. 1:1) and was often sent to particular churches with special tasks (1 Thess. 3:2 and 6, 1 Cor. 4:17,

16:10, Phil 2:19 and 23). Titus, on the other hand, was a Gentile Christian first mentioned in Gal. 2:1,3. He played an important role in resolving the Corinthian impasse (2 Cor. 8:6).

The Authorship of the Pastoral Letters

As we have seen the pastorals are widely regarded by scholars to be non-Pauline. Some of the Pauline words in these letters assume a different meaning from that of Paul. This is true of the word 'faith' which for Paul meant a trusting acceptance of the death of Christ for salvation. In Titus (1:13) faith means the body of teaching that makes up the Christian religion.

There are also historical problems. This is because the information from these letters does not tally with what we have in Acts of the Apostles. The pastorals, for example tell us that Paul left Timothy at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) and Titus at Crete (Tit. 1:5) to appoint church elders. This information is completely absent in Acts of the Apostles.

Also whereas the Pauline churches were charismatic, that is, led by those with divine gifts (charismata) (1 Cor. 12:28), the church in the pastorals was now institutional and hierarchic in terms of authority. Although it cannot be denied that this hierarchy began to emerge during the later part of Paul's life (Phil. 1:1), the hierarchy became manifest after Paul.

The letters also contradict Paul's attitude to women. Whereas Paul allowed women to prophecy in church (1 Cor. 11:5), the pastorals silence them (1 Tim. 2:8). It is mainly the reading of these letters that have led some churches to deny the ordination of women. The sum effect of these problems therefore has been to consider the pastorals non-Pauline.

There is, however, unanimity that the three letters were written by the same person. We do not know who exactly the author was but the similarities between these letters and the other Pauline letters lead us to suggest a disciple of Paul. Like other Pauline disciples before him he decided to address problems in his community in a way he thought Paul, who had died probably 20 to 40 years earlier, would do.

Date and place of Writing

As we have seen above, the hierarchical structure of church leadership points to a time of writing, at the earliest, towards the end of the first century. This outlook of the church is shared by later writers like Clement of Rome in his 96CE letter to the Corinthians and also by the letter of Ignatius. We can therefore put these books between the end of the first century and the middle of second century. As for the place of writing, nothing is clear.

Major Themes in the Pastoral Letters

Although written separately, three overarching major themes can be identified in the pastorals: false teaching, institutionalised leadership and ethical admonitions.

The Catholic Letters: Focus on James

The term ‘catholic’ was first used to describe 1 John. Eusebius then extended it to include James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude, 2 and 3 John. Catholic means general and so suited these seven letters. They are not addressed to specific people nor do they address specific contexts and needs. Rather they are written to the church as a whole. These letters have to be studied in the same way the Pauline letters are studied. One has to know the author, the date and place of writing and the major issues the author wanted to address. We shall look at the letter of James.

Authorship

The author of this book introduces himself simply as ‘James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:1). There are five Jameses in the NT who could be suggested as the authors of this book: James the son of Zebedee (Mar 1:19; 3:17 par.; Acts 12:2), James the son of Alphaeus (Mar. 3:18 par.), James the brother of Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary (Mar. 6:3 par.; 1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:19; 2:9,12; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18, Jude 1), James the Younger (son of Cleopas and Mary) (Mar. 15:40 par., John 19:25) and James the father of the Apostle Judas (Luke 6:16, Acts 1:13). If the author of this letter is not one of the five then he would be the sixth James of the New Testament.

Of the five James, the second, the fourth and the fifth are less likely to be the authors of the book. This is because this author must have been a well-known church official from the way he introduced himself and from the authority he displays in the letter. The three who are known only by their names are therefore less likely to be the authors of the book. This leaves us with the first and the third. The first would have been the strongest contender if he was not martyred in 44CE.

This leaves us with James the brother of the Lord as the likely author of this book. This is the longstanding tradition. Though James the brother of the Lord is the most likely author of the five, there are serious problems with his authorship too. Since James was a Palestinian, one would expect him to write in Aramaic, the common language of Palestine at the time. Surprisingly the book is in excellent Greek, unlikely to be from a Palestinian. The safest position is to conclude that James the brother of Jesus was not the author of the book. Since the author used the LXX (the Greek version of the Old Testament), he is likely to have been a Hellenistic Christian whose real identity we will never be sure of.

Date and Place of Writing

These depend on the author. Those who uphold James the brother of Jesus’ authorship would date the book ca. 45 CE in Palestine or in the early 60s as a reply to Paul’s theology of justification through faith. However, as we have seen above, this argument is difficult to sustain. The distance between the author and Paul and the catholic nature of the book point to a date towards the end of the first century. Syria is the likely place of writing because of the Hellenistic Jewish Christianity reflected in this book.

Major Themes of the Letter

Three major themes are addressed in this book: the necessity of works which appears to be the primary focus of this book (1:19-27; 2:14ff), Jewishness (in the light of the marked absence of uniquely Christian ideas in this book) and ethical teachings meant to support the theme of justification through works (1:2-28; 2:1-13; 5:1-6; 1:27; 2:14-26; 3:1-12; 4:1-12; 4:13-17).

The Apocalypse

The NT contains only one book that belongs to the genre of apocalypse. This is the book of Revelation, the last book of the NT. Before we look at the authorship, date, place of writing and major themes of this book, we need to familiarise ourselves with the genre of apocalypse. This is very necessary since the lack of knowledge of this genre has led to wild interpretations of the book, some with fatal results.

Apocalypticism

Apocalypticism is from the Greek word apocalypse that means 'revelation' or 'uncovering'. Thus apocalyptic literature is "work that records a vision usually to a human being (seer) in an altered state of consciousness, about another perfect, supernatural world (space) that will finally replace this evil world (time)".¹⁴

From the definition it can be seen that apocalypticism views the world to be dualistic: there is this world, the physical world that we know and live in and another world, a spiritual world, a world of God, angels and other spiritual beings. This world can only be known by those to whom it has been revealed by God. Such people are called seers or prophets.

Apocalypticism has its antecedents in the Old Testament. It is believed that it is a genre that arose with the demise of prophecy as an institution. The book of Daniel is the classic example of apocalyptic literature in the Hebrew Bible. Zechariah 1-8 can also be classified under apocalypticism. However, most of the apocalyptic books of the Jews are found in the non-canonical books of the Old Testament, the so-called Pseudepigraphic Literature.

Apocalypses are eschatological because they talk of the end of the present world. In most apocalypses, the present world is evil. It is going to be replaced at some point in time by a new, perfect and peaceful one. Usually the new world will be established through divine intervention. Time is therefore seen lineally with its movement going towards the end. Influenced by this vision of the world to come from the reading of the book of Revelation some cults have engaged in mass suicide in order for them to enter this 'new world'.

Authorship of the Book of Revelation

The author calls himself John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). He must have been a well known person to his readers since he does not tell them much about himself. He wrote to the seven

¹⁴D.C. Duling, 'Millennialism' in Rohrbaugh, R.L. (ed), *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*, Massachusetts: Hendrikson Publishers, 1996, 181-201.

churches of Asia from the island of Patmos which was itself off the coast of Asia. This shows that he must have been a fellow resident of Asia. Beginning with Justin the Martyr, the early church considered this John to be the apostle of Jesus, the son of Zebedee. As a result, the Gospel of John and the three Johannine letters were ascribed to him. It is on this basis that even today scholars talk of the Gospel, the three letters and Revelation as the Johannine Corpus.

Modern scholars, however, deny that Revelation and the Gospel were written by the same author. There are differences in style and theology which have led scholars to conclude that these were not written by the same person. As we argued in our discussion of the authorship of the fourth gospel, we are of the opinion that the Johannine corpus came from a Johannine community. As to the identity of the authors or specific author it is safe to leave it open.

Date and Place of Writing

The date of writing depends much on the occasion of the book. Many scholars think that the book was written towards the end of the first century during the reign of emperor Domitian (81-96 C.E). This is because the author seems to be describing the Domitian persecution (2:10, 13, 6:9, 3:10 etc). As for the place of writing there is general agreement on the basis of what the author says that the book was written in Asia Minor.

The Occasion of the Book

Revelation was written when Christians in Asia Minor were facing severe persecution. It is clear from this that this was not the Neronian persecution which history tells us was limited to Rome. Thus the persecution would have been the Domitian persecution which seems to have been much more widespread. Unlike his predecessors, Domitian wanted to enforce emperor worship. This attempt brought him into conflict with the Christians.

The Jews were exempted from emperor worship but when Christians seceded from Judaism they were considered suspect. Their refusal to worship the emperor was read to be atheism, disloyalty or even subversion. Later their practice of brotherly and sisterly love and the Eucharist were thought to be incest and infanticide respectively. The Romans even attributed natural disasters to Christians' refusal to worship the emperor. As a result Christians faced severe persecution. It is in the light of this persecution that the book of Revelation was written.

Major Themes in Revelation

The author wanted to teach and encourage his readers. He appealed to them to resist all demands for them to worship the emperor. As a result martyrs are praised throughout the book (6:9-11; 14:13; 15:2-4; 19:14; and 20:6). Using symbolic language, Rome is described as a great harlot (17:1-6), wasted in civil strife (17:16). It is doomed and Christians are urged not to share in its impurity (18:1-4). The author also foretells the coming of a new order after the destruction of the present one.

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the New Testament mainly from a historical-critical perspective. It has shown that the books of the NT originated in the early Christian mission and were meant to address issues raised by the early church's evangelism and mission.

This, however, does not mean that the NT is now irrelevant to the modern reader. Instead, knowledge of the context from which the NT books originated and of their original meaning is important for determining the meaning of the texts to the modern reader. As the focus of this book is African readers, attention has also been made to introduce the NT in the light of African experiences and traditions.

Further Reading

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CHAPTER FIVE

Major Themes in the New Testament

Tlali Lerotholi

Scope and Purpose of this Chapter

This study is an introduction to the New Testament. It focuses on the major themes found across the twenty-seven New Testament writings. These have been chosen for their theological significance. There are in fact too many major themes in the New Testament to deal with adequately within this chapter alone. Dealt with exhaustively, each theme would merit a chapter on its own.

These themes will not be studied in isolation from one another but in unison. Studied together they make the New Testament into one cumulative story.¹ This study has a dual purpose. First, it aims at familiarizing readers with major themes of the New Testament and their theological import and second, to acquaint readers with some methods of interpretation. It aims at both men and women, teachers and students. It is an all embracing approach. Before dealing with major themes as such there are preliminaries which a reader must bear in mind when reading the New Testament as a whole.

General Understanding of the New Testament

The New Testament is part of the Biblical canon that is, both the Old and New Testament. The focal point of the New Testament is the Christ event; his death and resurrection. Everything else revolves around this central theme. The rest of the New Testament is about the witnesses of the Christ event, namely, the witnesses of the Synoptic writers [Mark, Mathew, Luke], John, Paul and other witnesses like Peter, Hebrews and Revelation.

The Synoptic Gospels are outstanding in the way they narrate the Christ event. They tell the same story in almost the same order, the same way and in the same words. They reveal both striking similarities and sharp differences.

Witness is the key word which is associated with the Christ event. As we shall see later in this study, the Christian understanding of witness is developed mainly in the Gospel according to John and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

¹Gerald O'Collins & Daniel Kendall, *The Bible for Theology: Ten Principles for the Theological use of Scripture*, New York: Paulist Press, 1997, 28.

The Major Divisions of the New Testament

There are different ways of classifying the New Testament literature. First, it can be classified according to subject matter, e.g. kingdom of God. Second, according to literary form, e.g. parable. Third, according to key places, e.g. Galilee, Jerusalem. Fourth, according to key questions, e.g. "Who do say I am?" Finally, it can also be classified according to key characters, e.g. John the Baptist.²

I prefer to classify it according to literary forms. This makes it easier for students, in particular, to appreciate the diversity of literary forms within the New Testament. I have classified the books of the New Testament as follows.

Narrative Section: Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). "These books give highlights of and glimpses into the life of Jesus during his thirty-three years on earth. These books cannot be called a biography of His life because only three periods of His life are given in detail: His birth, age 12, and from age 30 to 33".³ The book of the Acts of the Apostles, is a history of the Early Church. It "is not, strictly speaking, a record of the activities of the Apostles. Only a very few of the apostles are active in this record. This book of twenty-eight chapters is a history of the beginning and spread of Christianity".⁴

Epistolary Section: 13 Letters of Paul, 3 Johannine Letters.

Catholic Letters: Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter, Jude, James.

Apocalyptic Literature: Revelation.

Points to Bear in Mind When Reading the New Testament

Bible study presupposes a lot of background information about the history, geography, politics, culture and languages of ancient Palestine. This information is useful because of the differences in geographical, historical, cultural, socio-political and linguistic contexts between the biblical writers and contemporary readers. Reading is a complex process and "can become extremely complicated if the writer and the reader belong to totally different periods in time, different cultures, have never seen each other and do not know each other".⁵

The Bible makes most difficult reading "because of the distance in time and space between the writer and the reader, who is no longer even the originally intended reader".⁶ In order to appreciate better the message of the Bible, one needs to bear in mind the following points.

²A. Sweet, *How to study the Bible*, Texas: R. B. Sweet Co., 1963, 49.

³Sweet, *How to study the Bible*....., 43.

⁴Sweet, *How to study the Bible*....., 44.

⁵W. Vogels, *Interpreting Scripture in the Third Millenium*, University of Ottawa, Novali, 1993, 15.

⁶Vogels, *Interpreting Scripture*....., 15.

First, the literary context of any text is to be taken seriously. The context refers to the relation of the passage to the preceding and subsequent texts. It implies three aspects. These are: the basic message of the entire book or letter, the flow of thought from the preceding passage and then what follows the passage. "The exact meaning of a specific passage of Scripture is normally controlled by what precedes and what follows it".⁷

The individual passages make sense when read in the context of preceding and subsequent passages and finally in the context of the whole book or letter. Reading texts out of context is a great violation and a cause of misinterpretation and misunderstanding. For example, 1 Cor. 13:1-13 makes sense in the context of 1 Cor. 12 and 1 Cor. 14.

Second, some knowledge of the social location of New Testament writers is vital. Social location refers to an individual's place in her/his society. "People are socially located and socially constructed into a number of relationships that empower or disempower them within the family, church, work-place, government and international class. Social location includes gender, class, ethnicity, history, health status, weight, height, and how these categories are valued by a particular society".⁸ The story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well is one such example where social location is important (John 4:5-42).

Third, together with the social location, one needs to know the geographical context of the major New Testament events, like the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. The events of the New Testament, as part of the Bible, did not happen in a void but in historic places. In order to impress this historic dimension on the reader's mind and thereby eliminate the idea of the Jesus story being fictitious, it is essential to know the geographical location of the most important places such as Jerusalem, Galilee, Samaria, Nazareth. Knowledge of New Testament geography can help the reader of the New Testament to understand and visualize the stories and events described, especially in the gospels.

Fourth, the historical background of the New Testament is also necessary. The New Testament is a historical document and is historically conditioned. In order to appreciate the text of the New Testament, one needs to know the background from which it comes. "The Bible involves a great deal of history. Every biblical event and teaching arose from and is part of a particular history and culture".⁹ For example, the birth of Jesus is framed by the census decreed by Caesar Augustus (Lk 2:1-2).

Fifth, the New Testament is culturally conditioned. The cultural context is very important. "Culture involves the habits, customs, tools, institutions, arts, music, and literary productions of any group of people – everything they create and use. The kind

⁷A. B. Mickelson, *Understanding Scripture: How to Read and Study the Bible*, Pabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1982, 63.

⁸Musa Dube (ed.), *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*, Geneva: WCC Publications 2003, 101.

⁹Mickelson, *Understanding Scripture*....., 53.

of homes people live in, their tools, clothing, food, means of travel are sometimes significant in understanding the Bible".¹⁰ Some typical examples are found in the following passages: (Mt 9: 1-8; Mk 2:1-12; 7:3-4).

A sixth point to bear in mind is the socio-religious context of the Biblical times. Most events in the New Testament are framed by main Jewish religious feasts: the Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles.¹¹ The main religious groups were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, Zealots and Essenes.¹² Some of these groups were hostile to Jesus while others were not. Scribes often challenged Jesus on the matters of the law (Lk10:25-28), while the Pharisees challenged him on religious matters (Mk 10:2-7). The Sadducees were opposed to the resurrection of the dead (Mk 12:18).

Last, but not least, we must understand the different economic situations in the Bible. "Decisions people made were often influenced by their economy".¹³ The economy includes the question of wages and the value of the currency used. The New Testament mentions currencies like the talent (Mt 25:14-30); didrachma (Mt 17:24) and denarius (Mt 20:2).¹⁴ These currencies only make sense if the reader knows their value. They may also cause a problem when translating into modern currencies. For example, is a denarius equal to one Rand or one Pula?

Dynamics of Reading the New Testament

What happens when we read the New Testament? The following dynamics are at play as we read:

The Art of Reading

Reading can be seen as a work of art, just like writing. It is the other side of writing. As an art, reading is acquired and learnable. There are certain skills to be learnt. Depending on how one has learnt these skills, one either becomes a competent/ critical reader or a literalist/fundamentalist one. The level of competency of a reader makes a world of difference in the interpretation of any given text.

This is what makes a difference between a skilful reader and an ordinary one, a good and a bad reader. A skilful reader construes a text while an ordinary reader misconstrues it. A critical reader pays attention to every element in the text [words, sentences, punctuation, syntax, style and morphology], and does not jump to conclusions prematurely. An ordinary reader may not pay attention to such subtleties in a text.

The competent reader lets the text suggest the context within which it is to be understood. The ordinary reader either ignores the context or changes it. For example,

¹⁰Mickelson, *Understanding Scripture*....., 56.

¹¹J. N. M. Wijngaards, *Background to the Gospels*, Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1990, 133.

¹²R. MacKenzie, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1960, 11-13.

¹³Mickelson, *Understanding Scripture*....., 58

¹⁴Wijngaards, *Background to the Gospels*....., 171.

in the parable of the prodigal son, it takes a critical reader to see that the “father” is the central character, not the younger son. This story is about the lavish love of the father.

The Act of Reading

Reading is a dynamic and interpretative process which involves the dialectical interaction between the world of the reader and the world of the text. In other words reading is a communication between the reader and the texts. The reader tries to enter the world of the text while the text enlarges the horizons of the world of the reader.

“Reading is not a monological process [i.e., a process by which the text speaks to the reader], but a dialogical one [i.e. reading is a process through which the text and reader engage in an on-going dialogue...is dynamic, open-ended, always subject to modification, change, evaluation, and re-reading”.¹⁵ As long as there are readers there is a reading activity.

The Role of the Author(s)

Although reading involves directly the reader and the text, but one cannot ignore the author who produced the text which is read. “Without an author, there is no text”.¹⁶ Behind the text, there is the world of the author which includes the cultural, ideological, historical, linguistic and socio-political conditions. In order to appreciate better the world of the text, one needs to uncover the world behind the text or the world of the author.

An author always has a reason to write. The knowledge of these circumstances can give a very new understanding of the text”.¹⁷ The author is the first person to give a text a meaning. He has an intention to communicate some message which he expresses through choice of words and genre. He writes with a specific purpose, to a specific audience.¹⁸ It is therefore incumbent on the reader to bear in mind this point when approaching the text.

The Role of the Reader(s)

The reader is indispensable in the process of reading. Without a reader, a text is only a lifeless collection of words. Every reader reads with a purpose. S/he gives life to the text and puts it in motion. Since reading is interpretation, the reader interprets, revives, resurrects and gives meaning to the text.

It has been said that each reader rewrites the text s/he reads. As J. Navone & T. Cooper say, “The reader analyses the text as something qualitatively distinct from either its author’s original intentions or its original historical contexts”.¹⁹ In other words, the reader also contributes to the meaning of the text.

¹⁵R. W. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991, 148.

¹⁶Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*....., 145.

¹⁷Vogels, *Interpreting Scripture*....., 16.

¹⁸O’Collins and Kendall, *The Bible for Theology*.....1997, 16.

¹⁹J. Navone & T. Cooper, *Seeking God in Story*, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1990, 18.

The Role of the Text(s)

Without a text to read there is no reading. Texts are products of authors but are interlocutors with the readers. Once composed, texts begin to enjoy a life of their own and yield further meanings, particularly as they are read in different and later contexts. They can bear meanings beyond the original author's intention.

Biblical texts gain a life of their own as they distance themselves from their original authors, enter new contexts, and find later readers. This is true of any written text. "Any written document enjoys such a dynamic, natural potential for developments in meaning"²⁰ Texts have a transformative power. They challenge, provoke, encourage and even rebuke the reader.

Our reading of the New Testament will take into consideration the social location of the reader. This includes gender, class, race, health, history as valued in the African historical and cultural context, and HIV&AIDS. HIV&AIDS has created a new context for reading and studying the New Testament.

Production of Meaning

"What does this text mean?" asks the reader. The main object of reading is to find the meaning of texts, that is, the original meaning of the text and the meaning that the reader brings to the text. It has been observed that "texts can bear meanings that go beyond the original authorial intentions. Once composed, texts begin to enjoy a life of their own and yield further meanings, particularly as they are read in different and later contexts".²¹

Critical reading goes from what the text says to what the text means. Texts contain a germ of life. They may convey meanings in author's words which the author herself was not aware of. But unless they are read and their message put into practice they are useless.

The meaning too is not an event but a process. The meaning of a text depends on a number of factors: the competency of the reader and the nature of the text. Meaning results from the interaction between the reader and the text. It is neither in the text alone nor is it found in the reader alone. Both the reader and text are actively and creatively engaged in the production of meaning. "Meaning occurs as readers discover, liberate, and re-create the sense of the text in (and to some extent from) their own contexts".²² The reader's role is vital for the production of meaning.

Methods Used: A Combination of Narrative and Thematic Approaches

No single method suffices since all methods have limitations. There is therefore a need for methods combining to complement each other. I will combine the Narrative and Thematic Approaches.

²⁰O'Collins & Kendall, *The Bible for Theology*.....1997, 14.

²¹O'Collins & Kendall, *The Bible for Theology*.....1997, 26.

²²O'Collins & Kendall, *The Bible for Theology*.....1997, 16.

Narrative approach focuses on story-telling. The New Testament will be seen as a long story or a series of stories. The gospels in particular will be seen as versions of the same story. J. Navone & T. Cooper say the following about the gospels, "Four versions of the Gospel story serve the Church as four manuals for the attainment of Christian maturity.Each Gospel corresponds to four stages of Christian maturation and perfection. They serve the Church as a pedagogical resource; as four manuals for articulating the meaning and for carrying forward the process of Christian conversion."²³

The story form is a preferred method in the New Testament and in most African contexts. The advantages of story-telling are innumerable.²⁴ Stories aid our memory to remember things. They excite our imagination. They challenge our assumptions and perceptions. They connect us to the biblical characters.

The other method which is thematic, is self-explanatory. This approach selects major themes which are central to the New Testament as we shall see below. I think it is the most suitable method for the nature of the work I am doing.

Dominant and Recurring Themes in the New Testament.

Criteria of Selection

The New Testament themes are innumerable: gospel, God, Christ, joy, mercy, law, justification, salvation, liberation, women, prayer, church, Holy Spirit, forgiveness, truth, healing, wealth, temptation, power, authority, leadership, service, community, apostleship, teaching, grace, fellowship, peace, etc. I simply cannot treat them all here in this short expose. Therefore, I have chosen to treat just a few of the major and most frequently recurring ones. I base the selection on the following criteria:

- (1) theological import
- (2) frequent recurrence in the New Testament
- (3) relations with other themes
- (4) ability to rise above their original settings and recur, with appropriate developments and modifications, in new contexts and
- (5) ability to be inculturated, that is, to be translated into contemporary languages and cultures.

Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God is the core of Jesus' message in the four Gospels [Mk 1:15; Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20; Jn 3:3]. His teachings, actions, and sayings focus on the same theme [Lk 7:22]. The kingdom of God is opposed to the kingdom of Satan [Mk 3:23-26; Mt 12:25-26; Lk 11:17-18].

²³J. Navone & T. Cooper, *Tellers of the Word*, New York: Le Jacq Publishing, 1981, 159.

²⁴W. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 1984, 120-136.

“The Greek word *basileia*, meaning the royal reign or kingdom of God, appears more than a hundred times in the Gospels,” [Mickelsen 1982:80]. It has its roots in the Old Testament. The kingdom of God was not only a focus of Jesus’ message, it was also a central message of John the Baptist [Mt 3:1-2]. Jesus also mandated the twelve [Lk 9:2] and the seventy-two disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God wherever they went [Lk 10:9-10].

Some of the outstanding characteristics of the kingdom of God follow:

- (1) It is a spiritual reality [Lk 17:20].
- (2) It is shrouded in mystery [Mk 4:11-12]. It is paradoxical. It is an imminent [Mk 1:15] present [Lk 11:20] and future reality [Mt 25:1-46].
- (3) It is eschatological and apocalyptic [Mt 13:21-23].
- (4) It is inseparable from the person of Christ [Lk 11:20].
- (5) It is also inseparable from his words and deeds [Mt 11: 5-6; Lk 7:20-22].
- (6) It is superior to Satan’s dominion [Lk 11:20].

There are certain conditions laid down in order to enter the kingdom.

- (1) repentance and faith [Mk 1:15].
- (2) doing the will of God [Mt 7:21].
- (3) Childlike humility [Mt 18:3-4].
- (4) renouncing riches and things one holds dear [Mt 19:24; Lk 18:29-30;]; (5) firm commitment to follow Jesus [Lk 9:60.62].
- (6) life of the beatitude [Mt 5:3-10].

The concept of the kingdom is too illusive to define. Its full meaning cannot be captured in a word or a phrase, or even a sentence. It is complex and multi-faceted. Aware of the nature of his message, Jesus devised a means of simplifying and making it accessible to the general public. He used parables. Parables are usually short catchy stories, imagined or taken from human experience, meant to challenge or provoke listeners to react to the message of Jesus. Examples are the sower, the seed, the weeds, the leaven, pearl and treasure. They are taken from the diverse reality of life such as farming (sower); business (treasure); family (two brothers); shepherding (lost sheep) and the economy (lost drachma).

A parable has only one central message. Jesus used all kinds of parables in relation to the kingdom of God. Some of these parables are about the kingdom while others are of the kingdom. The parables of the kingdom are known by their introductory formula: “The kingdom of God/ Heaven is like...” (Mk 4:26,30; Mt 13:24, 45; 22:2; 25:1; Lk 13:18, 20). The other kind of parables about the kingdom do not have any distinctive marks.

Dodd (1961:122-140) classifies them into two groups, viz. parables of crisis and parable of growth. The parables of crisis consist of the following: “The faithful and unfaithful servants; the waiting servant; the thief in the night, and ten virgins,... These parables are set in the context of exhortations to be ready, alert and wide-awake,” (Dodd 1961:122). The second group of parables focus on growth. The group consists

of the following: the Sower, the Tares, the Seed Growing Secretly and the Mustard Seed,” (Dodd 1961:140).

Besides parables, Jesus performed miracles to point to the coming of the kingdom. “His miracles were all acts of kindness and love by which He made the life of certain people happier in this world... and miracles had five important functions:

1. They explained His mission.
2. They revealed His divinity.
3. They proved Him to be the Messiah
4. They prepared the way for the sacraments
5. They began the world’s renewal”.²⁵

Miracles of Christ had the following characteristics:

1. The event must be *visible*
2. The event must *go beyond the powers of nature* (that is, it must have God for its author).
- 3 The event must be *the sign of the divine message*”.²⁶

Jesus performed all kinds of miracles ranging from the raising of the dead persons, cure of physical illnesses to casting out evil spirits from those who were possessed. In other words, miracles of Jesus are his benevolent acts towards wretched humanity and people are the only beneficiaries, not Jesus himself.

Conversion

The second most important theme is conversion or repentance [*metanoia*]. *Metanoia* and *epistrophe* are the two Greek words used in the New Testament to express the total interior conversion and radical turning back to God. It implies broken relationship with God. “The idea of “conversion” forms a bright trajectory through both Testaments of the Bible”.²⁷ It is closely related to the kingdom of God as I mentioned earlier. It is a required condition to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus started his preaching by calling people to repentance (conversion) (Mk 1:15). The term ‘conversion’ is found throughout the New Testament. It has its roots in the Old Testament. *Metanoia* implies radical change of mind and heart.

“Conversion [*metanoia*] assumes particular significance in Luke’s Gospel. The verb convert is used sixteen times in the Synoptic Gospels, nine times in Luke; the noun appears eight times, five times in Luke...According to Luke, conversion is an essential term for defining the mission of Jesus (Lk 5:32)”.²⁸ In the gospel, there are many classic examples of conversion stories: the woman with ointment (Lk 7:36-50),

²⁵Wijngaards, *Background to the Gospels*....., 228.

²⁶Wijngaards, *Background to the Gospels*....., 217.

²⁷Michael Dick, “Conversion in the Bible” in Robert Dugan (ed.), *Conversion and the Catechumenate*, New York: Paulist Press, 1984, 43.

²⁸Dick, “Conversion in the Bible”....., 1984, 54

the parable of the repentant son (Lk 15:11-32), the story of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10), and the story of the penitent thief (Lk 23:39-43).

There is a series of stories of conversion also in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. In the Book of Acts *metanoia* is opposed to ignorance, such as that which explains the distorted concept of the kingdom of God and led the Jews to the condemnation of Christ (3:17; 13:27). “*Metanoia* requires the acquisition of knowledge and instruction (20:20)”.²⁹

There are two types of conversion narratives. One type is collective conversion stories (Acts 2:41,47; 3:19). The other is individual conversion stories, like those of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), Paul (Acts 9), Cornelius (Acts 10) and Peter (Acts 10). These examples of conversion point to the fact that conversion is a gift from God and it is not imposed on anyone.

Finally, conversion is not an end in itself since it aims at reconciliation with God. According to Gaventa, in the New Testament there are three main forms of conversion:

- (1) pendulum-like conversion, for example, the conversion of Paul (Acts 9)
- (2) alternation, for example, the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10)
- (3) transformation, for example, the conversion of Peter (Acts 10).

Conversion is a necessary condition for a disciple of Christ as we shall see below. It is a sign of the acceptance of the Gospel and transforms the life of a disciple.

Discipleship

The third important theme is discipleship. Discipleship means “followership.” The Greek verb (*akoloutheo*) “to follow” appears ninety-one times and the noun “disciple” (*mathetes*) appears 261 times in the New Testament. “The gospel of John prefers this term and uses it sixty-one times. Matthew uses it thirty-six times, Luke, twelve times, and Mark, nine times. The disciples are those who freely choose to follow the Lord, to be with him, and to accept his mission”.³⁰

A disciple is a follower, a learner. The idea of discipleship therefore implies a teacher/ learner or leader/follower relationship. The one instructs and the other learns from the acts and sayings of the master. “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master,” (Mt 10:24). To be a disciple of Christ means a follower of Christ in the mystery of his suffering, death and resurrection. Discipleship entails the following three points.

Firstly, the call. To be a disciple one needs to respond positively to the call of Christ. It is a personal call. It is directed to a specific individual person, like Peter or Matthew. The characteristic invitation of Jesus is expressed thus, “Follow me,” [Mt 9:9; Mk 2:13-14; Lk 5:27-28; Jn 21:19].

²⁹John Navone & Thomas Cooper, *Tellers of the Word*, New York: Le Jacq Publishing Inc, 1981, 42.

³⁰J. O’Grady, *Disciples and Leaders: The origins of Christian Ministry in the New Testament*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1991, 67.

Secondly, self-renunciation. It is one of the conditions of being a disciple, "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him/ her renounce oneself and take up one's cross and follow me," (Mt 10:38-39; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23-24). Discipleship involves freedom to choose, self-renunciation and taking up one's cross.

Finally, there is a reward for being a disciple (Mt19: 27-29; Mk 10:28-30; Lk18: 18-30). Each gospel focuses on certain aspects of Christian discipleship. Within the Synoptic tradition, Mark's presentation of discipleship is outstanding. It is a key concern throughout his gospel. We find four stories that speak of the call of the disciples:

- (1) the call of Simon and Andrew (Mk1:16-18)
- (2) the call of James and John (1:19-20)
- (3) the call of Levi (2:14);
- (4) the call of twelve (3:13-19)

Mark's presentation of discipleship focuses on companionship with Jesus. "Jesus chooses the twelve according to Mark in order that "they might be with" with him (3:14). As those who accompany him, they become witnesses to his public ministry of teaching, preaching and healing".³¹ Throughout his gospel, Mark stresses the continual presence of the apostles with Jesus until the passion when they all desert him (14:50). He builds the theme of discipleship "on the way". Jesus and his disciples are often portrayed being "on the way" (8:27; 9:33,34; 10:17,32, 34, 46,52).³² Discipleship, according to Mark, leads to the way of the cross.

As for Mathew, the emphasis is on learning from Christ, the master. "Jesus is their "one teacher" and "Lord" (10:24; 23:8,10), and they are his "slaves" who "learn from him (10:24;11:29; 13:36; 51-52),"".³³

Luke has a different view of discipleship. While Luke shares a lot in common with other gospel writers, he uses a "journey motif" to describe Christian discipleship.³⁴ "Jesus journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem to accomplish what his disciples will communicate in their journeys from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Rome) in the Age of the Church (Luke-Acts)".³⁵

The statement above sums up Luke's teaching on discipleship. Jesus makes disciples as he journeys towards his final destination in Jerusalem. During his journeys, he calls the twelve and seventy-two others, and sends them on a mission. On their way towards Rome, according to the Acts plan, his disciples also make other disciples. Many were converted through the apostolic preaching. Philip evangelized the

³¹J. D. Kingsbury, *Jesus Christ in Matthew, Mark and Luke*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981, 51.

³²D. Marguerat & B. Yvan, *How to Read Bible Stories*, London: CSM Press, 1998, 38.

³³Kingsbury, *Jesus Christ in Matthew*...., 86.

³⁴D. Sweetland, *Our Journey with Jesus: Discipleship According to Luke-Acts*, Minnesaota: The Liturgical Press, 1990, 108.

³⁵J. Navone, *Seeking God in Story*, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990, 131.

Samaritans and he also baptised the Ethiopian eunuch, the first African convert (Acts 8:26-40). Peter baptized Cornelius and all his household (Acts 10:48). The book of the Acts of the Apostles is replete with such stories.

It is quite clear from Luke-Acts that Luke “intends to foster a strong sense of the life of faith as a journey with the Lord Jesus in the context of which he makes known the qualities of character he requires of his followers”.³⁶

Another important feature of discipleship in Luke-Acts is listening or hearing the word (8:15; 8:21; 10:39 11:28). “The listening/hearing motif is even more prominent in Acts than in the Gospel”.³⁷ Conversion in Acts comes from what is heard (Acts 2:6,8, 11, 22, 33, 37). Effective hearing leads to salvation.

Amongst the four gospels, John stands out on discipleship. Unlike the Synoptic writers, John stresses the question of discipleship rather than apostleship. There is no single mention of the list of the twelve in John. The word “apostle” is used only once and the word ‘twelve’ is used four times (6:67, 70, 71; 20:24). From the above statistics, it is clear that discipleship according to John extends beyond the narrow group known as the twelve. John is not interested in the apostles as a group but as individual disciples. Discipleship is personal and involves an appeal to an individual. It involves person-to-person encounters with Christ: Jesus and Nicodemus (ch.3), Jesus and the Samaritan woman (ch.4), Jesus and the lame man (ch.5), Jesus and the blind man (ch.9), Jesus and ‘his own’ (ch. 13-17), Jesus and Pilate (ch. 18:28-19:16).³⁸ The story of each person who becomes a disciple is very important in John.

Each individual disciple represents a type of discipleship. The beloved disciple is not just one individual among many who has come to believe in Jesus. Rather he is the epitome of believer, disciple, beloved and witness. He represents all the ones loved by Christ and faithful to him while Judas Iscariot stands for all unfaithful disciples.

“The disciples in the Fourth Gospel tend to stand in the middle, between Jesus and the world. Those who do not defect (6:66) abide with Jesus and are not of the world as he is not of the world (17:14)”.³⁹

Faith

Faith is the fourth theme. Linked to the theme of discipleship is the notion of faith (*pistis*) or believing (*pisteuein*). Faith is a characteristic mark of being a disciple. A true disciple is the one who truly believes in Christ. It is a personal response to God’s revelation. “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom...” (Mt 7: 21).

In the book of Acts, we read of “those who believe” as a distinct group (2:44; 5:14; 15:5). Faith takes place in response to hearing ‘the word’ (4:4). “Faith comes

³⁶S. Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels*, London: SPCK, 1992, 100.

³⁷Sweetland, *Our Journey with Jesus*...., 111.

³⁸Barton, *The Spirituality*....., 116.

³⁹P. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, John Knox Press, 1985, 52.

from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ,” (Rom 10:17). It makes miracles of healing possible (Mk4:40; Lk 17:11-19; Acts 3:16; 14:9). It is both a gift and a theological virtue, together with hope and love (1 Cor 13:13). It is a victory over the world (1Jn 4:4).

Luke, in particular, links faith with salvation. “Faith is a prerequisite for healing-as-salvation...” “The act of believing” is as fundamental to salvation in the gospel as it is in Acts”.⁴⁰ Genuine faith is not something momentary but a lasting disposition of a believer. Aware of the danger of apostasy, Luke speaks about the theme of faith-as-perseverance (Lk 18:1-8; 22:31). Apostasy was a real danger for the apostles as well the other disciples.

Paul in his letters stresses another aspect of faith which is faith that justifies (Rom 3:22-24; Gal 2:16-17). Paul’s notion of faith is complimented by James who talks about faith with works (Jas 2:14-18). The Letter to the Hebrews gives us a long list of men and women of faith from the Old Testament who are exemplary for Christians (Heb.11:1- 31). Faith is connected to the theme of the resurrection as we shall see below.

Resurrection

The resurrection is the fifth theme. The resurrection of Jesus, the crucified, is the central theme of the whole New Testament. It is “the key to the Christian interpretation of the divine and human co-authoring of the Jesus story, the story of the Church and the universal story of the world”.⁴¹ The resurrection of Jesus is the most miraculous story in the Bible, and in the New Testament in particular. Unlike other stories of the raising of the dead to life, “the resurrection of Jesus is not the bringing back to life a corpse. It is not revivification or resuscitation”.⁴²

Christian faith affirms the uniqueness of Christ’s death as salvific and redemptive. All other themes are subsumed under the resurrection and all the New Testament writings testify to the Easter event. “Christ’s death and resurrection (with the associated gift of the Holy Spirit) form the most crucial watershed in the history of revelation and salvation, being the instance *par excellence* of discontinuity and continuity”.⁴³

With the resurrection of Jesus, there is a radical transformation. Every event is seen in the light of the resurrection. Nothing is the same again. “Revelation and salvation are now thoroughly personalized in the Easter proclamation (e.g. 1Cor 1:23; 15:1-11); redemption has come through Christ’s sacrificial death (e.g. Rom 3:24-25; 1Cor 5:7; 11:23-26)”.⁴⁴ The resurrection is the basis of the Christian faith (1Cor 15:14).

⁴⁰Barton, *The Spirituality*...., 84-85.

⁴¹Navone & Cooper, *Tellers of the Word*.... 239.

⁴²Navone & Cooper, *Tellers of the Word*.... 239.

⁴³O’Collins and Kendall, *The Bible for Theology*... 30.

⁴⁴Collins and Kendal, *The Bible for Theology* 30

The New Testament as a whole is the collection of witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. We have the testimony of the four evangelists, including Acts (Lk 24:48; Acts 1:8). As we shall see below, Acts, in particular, insistently tells us of the witnesses of Jesus. Each gospel ends with the resurrection account and with special emphasis on the theology of each evangelist. "He is not here; for he has been raised," (Mt 28:6). "He has been raised; he is not here," (Mk 16:6). "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon," (Lk 24:34).

We also have testimonies from the letters of Paul, the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 10:12-14; 11:35) and the catholic letters (1Pet.3:21). In 1Corinthians 15, Paul devotes the whole chapter to the theme of the resurrection. He omits the question of the empty tomb and gives a long list of witnesses of the resurrection. He also outlines the effects of the resurrection on Jesus and on the believers.

Risen from the dead, death has no more power over him; he lives forever (Rom 6:9.10). Death is swallowed up in victory (1Cor 15: 54). The resurrection is presented as the act of God and a manifestation of his power (Phil 3:10). It is God who raised Jesus from death (1Cor 6:14; 1Cor 15:15). Christ in turn becomes the power of God.

The effects of the resurrection on believers are many. Firstly, it is the source of our justification (Rom 4:25). Secondly, Jesus intercedes for us (Rom 8:34). Thirdly, for those who profess faith in the resurrection will be saved (Rom 10:9). Fourthly, it is the source of hope for believers, "but if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him," (Rom 6:8). O'Collins sums up the significance of the resurrection, by saying: "As the central metanarrative of the Bible, the resurrection of the crucified Jesus binds the scriptures together, intersects with our history, and holds theology together for all those who consciously align themselves with the Easter mystery,"⁴⁵

Witness

Witness is the sixth theme. The theme of witness is directly linked to the resurrection as we have seen above. It subsumes many other themes, like faith and love. The theme of witness is a central concern mainly in Luke-Acts and John. The Greek *martus* (witness) is most frequent in Johannine writings where it appears about thirty-three times. It is also prominent in Luke-Acts.⁴⁶

While the theme of witness is found in many writings of the New Testament, I wish to focus mainly on Luke-Acts and the Gospel of John. In Luke-Acts the theme of witness is quite prominent. It is linked directly to the resurrection of the Christ. Towards the end of the gospel we read, "You are witnesses of these things" (Lk 24:48). A similar message is found in Acts, "And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth," (Acts 1:8).

From the viewpoint of the thematic development and structure of Acts, Acts 1:8 is programmatic and a keynote text. Firstly, it specifies the apostles who are the privi-

⁴⁵Collins and Kendal, *The Bible for Theology...* 27-28.

⁴⁶A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 66.

leged witnesses of the risen Lord. Secondly, it identifies the power of the Holy Spirit as the main source of witness. Thirdly, it outlines the missionary trajectory of the Church in three parts from Jerusalem (Acts 1-7), in Samaria (Acts 8-12), and to the ends of the earth (Acts 13-28).

The rest of the book speaks about the testimony of the twelve apostles and other witnesses in the life of the Church. Having set the criteria for becoming an apostolic witness in Acts 1:22, Acts mentions constantly the witness of the apostles and other disciples. Acts 1:22 stipulates two of the criteria of being an apostolic witness as follows: Firstly, one must be familiar with the public life of Jesus from his baptism. Secondly, one has to have the experience of the Risen Christ and a witness of his resurrection.

The driving force behind any witness is the Holy Spirit as it was promised in Acts 1:8, "You will receive power from above and you shall be my witnesses." The apostles' response to that mandate is the phrase "we are witnesses" which is like a refrain which weaves together the whole book of Acts (2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39).

Besides the twelve apostles, there are other witnesses: Stephen and Paul. Stephen is presented as a martyr, a witness par excellence (Acts 22:20). Paul is another important witness (Acts 13:31; 22:15, 18: 20; 22:15; 23:11; 26: 16).

In John's gospel witness has juridical and legal character. The whole gospel is like a courtroom setting where cases are presented against the accused who happened to be Jesus. He must defend himself effectively by producing valid testimony backed up by a number of witnesses. John mentions quite a long list of witnesses ranking from human to divine.

The first human witness mentioned is John the Baptist. The author himself introduces John the Baptist as a witness of Jesus (Jn1: 6-8). He came as a witness to testify to the light. John testifies to him as the Lamb of God (1:29). From the prologue, John's witness reaches its climax with his declaration that Jesus is the messianic bridegroom. As such he must decrease while Jesus increases. Another reference to John's witness is 5:33-35.

Secondly, it is the witness of his disciples. The people that Jesus encounters become his disciples, starting with the Samaritan woman until the man born blind. They each bear witness to Jesus. "Many Samaritans believed from that city because of the woman's testimony," (4:39). The one who was blind makes a solemn declaration of faith "Lord, I believe" (9:38). Besides human witnesses, Jesus speaks about the testimony of the Father (5:37) which is greater than that of John. He also adds the witness of the Scriptures (5:39). His works too bear witness to him (14:11). The signs that he performs bear witness to him.

Above all Jesus stands his own ground and bears witness to himself (8:14) but the Jews dispute his personal testimony. After the moment of his glorification, the Holy Spirit will bear witness to him (15:26-27). It is the Holy Spirit who will teach his disciples the whole truth about Jesus. In summary, witness is one of the favourite themes in John's gospel.

Love

The seventh theme is love. Love is a translation from two Greek words in the New Testament: *philia* and *agape*. John, the evangelist, plays with both words in his gospel. He uses *philein* to refer to love of friendship. For an example, Jesus loved Lazarus, Martha and Mary. "*Philein* and *philia* designate primarily the love of friendship. *Agape* and *agapan* designate the unique and original Christian idea of love in the New Testament.

Agape, often called "gift or love" would be more accurately called or styled "self-gift-of-love." None of the New Testament writers appreciated more this type of love than John and Paul (John 3:16; 20:22; Rom 5:5; 8:32).⁴⁷ However, the parable of the Prodigal son in Luke 15: 11-32 takes exception to what has been affirmed above. It portrays the extraordinary love of the Father for both his sons. He goes out of his way to accommodate the needs of his sons. "He gives himself in love to both his sons".⁴⁸ This parable most accurately points at the salvific aspect of love. It is about loving "in spite of" what happened before. It is unconditional forgiveness. It is about pardoning and loving sinful enemies.

Love is the fulfilment and perfection of the Torah. It summarises all the Decalogue. It is the greatest commandment Christ gave to his disciples (Lk 10:25-28). It is the mark of discipleship in Christ (Jn 13:34-35). It is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). Paul calls it a better way, more important than all spiritual gifts (1Cor12:31). Perfect love casts out fear (1Jn 4:18). John sums it up by saying "God is love" (1Jn 4:8). In other words, love is the essence of God. The New Testament divides love into divine love and human love.

Divine love refers to God's love for Christ and for the world. It could also refer to Christ's love for humanity. In John's Gospel we repeatedly read of the love of the Father for the Son (3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 15:9; 17:24,26). The elements of the Father's love which are emphasized are kindness, intimacy (Jn 1:18; 17:23) and generosity of His gift. "The Father loves the Son and has put all things at His disposal," (Jn 3:35). God's love for humanity as a whole is expressed well in the verse, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal eternal life," (Jn 3:16).

This verse sums up all that could be said about God's love for the world (humanity). God so much loved the world that he sacrificed his Son for the salvation of the world. God's love for the world is redemptive. Salvation comes from the divine initiative. "He gave His Son not to condemn but to save the world through Him," (Jn 3:17).

These words from John's Gospel find an echo in Paul's letters. "God made him sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor 5:21). God's love for humanity is inherently linked to Christ's love. "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us," (Rom 5:8). "He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8).

⁴⁷O'Collins and Kendall, *The Bible for Theology*....., 60

⁴⁸O'Collins and Kendall, *The Bible for Theology*....., 60

In John's Gospel, Jesus shows a special love for the twelve apostles (13:1). Besides the twelve, there are specific people Jesus loved: the beloved disciple (Jn 13:23; 19:25-27), Lazarus, Mary and Martha (Jn 11:5). But Jesus' love for Lazarus is outstanding, he wept for him and people marvelled him saying, "see how much he loved him," (Jn 11:35).

Together with divine love, there is fraternal charity, that is, human love for one another (Jn 13:34). The love that disciples must show towards one another is to be the same character and intensity as that with which Christ loved them.

Brotherly love is a must for any disciple of Christ. He who says that he loves God, whom he does not see, but hates a brother he sees, is a liar. Loving obedience brings the disciples into the divine intimacy with Christ (Jn 14:23). But our love for one another must be genuine, not only through words alone but through action too. By loving one another, we love the Lord himself (Mt 25:40).

Mission

Finally we deal with the theme of mission. Mission is another important theme in the New Testament and is linked to all the previous ones. It is linked directly to conversion, discipleship, faith, love and witness. As we have seen under discipleship, when Christ started his ministry he invited followers: "Come follow me." He called those he was to send to evangelise the world: "Go, evangelize."

All the four gospels end up with this injunction: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations..." (Mt 28:19). "Go out to the whole world..." (Mk 16:16). "In his name repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem," (Lk 24:47; Acts 1:8). A similar injunction is found in John's gospel: "Receive the Holy Spirit..." (Jn 20:22-23). Commissioning stories are quite common in the New Testament. Christ made sure that his mission on earth is carried out. He therefore empowers and sends out into the world those he had chosen.

Among the New Testament writers, Luke emerges as the one who elaborates most on the theme of mission. While he shares with other gospel writers the sending out of the twelve (Lk 9: 1-6, Mk 6:6-13; Mt 10: 5-15), Luke alone narrates the sending on mission of the seventy (-two) (10:1-20); and his second volume is a carefully constructed narrative of the programmatic missionary witness of the Church...⁴⁹ He makes an interesting link between mission and witness. The missionary mandate of apostles is that they, having received the power of the Holy Spirit, be witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles are the main missionary witnesses of the resurrection of the Christ (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 10:39-43).

The role of the Holy Spirit is paramount in the mission of the Church. The Holy Spirit is the principal agent of the whole mission of the Church. Besides helping apostles become courageous witnesses, the Spirit is the power behind their preaching (2:4,14; 4:31) and all their activities (6:10; 7:55; 8:39; 13:4,9). The Spirit is the divine

⁴⁹Barton, *The Spirituality.....*, 96.

guarantee and assurance that the mission of Jesus entrusted to apostles is sure to continue in the new age of the Spirit. The Spirit makes the mission of the Church progress unhindered and any opposition serves to propel it forward. Amidst great opposition, the Church's mission advanced in Acts (4:19-20; 5:29). The Holy Spirit expands the mission of the Church to horizons far beyond human understanding.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the above mentioned themes weave the theology of the New Testament. They make the New Testament into one cumulative story. The treatment of the above mentioned themes has not been exhaustive; there are other themes which are subsumed under these main ones.

The study of these themes is not merely an intellectual exercise but it is meant for the spiritual transformation of the believers. Therefore these themes need to be translated into the lives of the believers. In other words, these themes need to be translated in the cultures and languages of the believers, and African believers in particular. Most of these themes, if not all of them, can be expressed through African forms of wisdom, namely, proverbs, sayings, idioms, poetry, songs and prayers.

CHAPTER SIX

Religion, Race, Gender and Identity¹

Musa W. Dube

Racism is a concept based on the assumption that an aggregate of descendants of a common ancestral origin have superior characteristics, coupled with a belief in their right to dominate others who differ decisively from their own distinct identity traits. In other words, racism can apply to any group of immanent relations (family, tribe, people, nation) who possess the power to define rights, duties, and liberties; to legitimize ideologies, theologies, and systems of value; to assign myths to various members of the human family, which in turn, invariably divide human ontology between persons and non-persons.

—Katie Cannon

“Cast Out This Slave Woman with Her Son”

The book of Genesis tells the story of many patriarchs of Israel. Abraham, who was promised the nation of Israel, is one of the central founding fathers of Israel (Gen 12:1, 3). Abraham has two sons, Ishmael and Isaac through, respectively, Hagar and Sarah. There is a story behind how he came to have sons by two different mothers: Sarah and Abraham were married, but they had no children. Sarah, who believed that the Lord had closed her womb (Gen.16:2), said to Abraham, “Go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her”. He went in to Hagar and she conceived (Gen.16:2-3). Hagar bore a son called Ishmael. After the birth of Ishmael, Hagar is said to have “looked with contempt on her mistress” (Gen.16:4). Sarah complained to Abraham, who said, “Your slave girl is in your power; do to her as you please.’ Then Sarah dealt harshly with her and she ran away” (Gen 16:6). But as she ran away, the angel of the Lord met and talked to her, saying, “return to your mistress and submit to her... I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be numbered for multitude” (Gen. 16:7,10). Hagar returned, and we hear of no more quarrels between the two women.

¹This paper was previously published as “Religion, Racism and Gender,” 33-45, in T. Mumba, ed. *Gender and Racism: Double Jeopardy for Women*. Harare: IPS, 2001.

Some years later, the Lord opened the womb of Sarah; she bore a son to Abraham and named the child Isaac. The story tells us that Sarah's "child grew ... Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac." So she said to Abraham:

Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son, Isaac. The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring. So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba ... God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt. (Gen.21:10.21).

What is this story about? Why does the Lord close the womb of Sarah, cause her to give Hagar to Abraham, then open her womb again? Why does the Lord command a harshly treated slave to return and to be submissive to her mistress? Why does the same Lord God allow Sarah to throw Hagar and her son out, once Sarah has borne Isaac? And if the Lord says Abraham's descendants will be through Isaac, but promises Ishmael to be the founder of another nation, are these two nations equal?

Ideology of Gender and Racism in Religious Stories

Gender refers to a culture-specific social construction; namely, the roles assigned to women and men. Research shows that women and men in different societies are given different gender roles. These ascribed roles do not distribute power equally. In most cases, gender has been constructed from an androcentric point of view; that is, from a male perspective. It gives public power of decision making, leadership and property ownership to men. Women, on the other hand, are confined to the home as wives and mothers. They exist under the leadership of fathers, husbands or brothers and depend on the property of the same. Gender, therefore, does not distribute power equally between men and women; hence the women's movement towards gender justice or gender empowerment, which seeks to build better relationships.

Research shows that gender oppression works together with other forms of social discrimination such as racism, classism, ageism and ethnic marginalization. Racism, as Katie Canon tells us, is applied by those "who possess power to define rights, duties and liberties; to legitimize ideologies ... assign myths to various members of human families, which in turn, invariably divide human ontology between persons and non-persons".² Racism, like gender, does not distribute power equally between people of different colours, ethnic groups, nations, regions and religions.

²K. G. Cannon, "Racism," in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. V. Fabella & R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 2000), 175.

Class discrimination is when power in the society is not distributed equally on the basis of material (and sometimes birth/nobility) ownership. The society and nations are thus divided into what is known as low, middle and high class or first, second and third world. Age is also socially used to empower or disempower people. In some societies elderly people are given power, while young people are denied leadership, decision making and property ownership. In other societies, young people or youthfulness is highly honoured while age can lead to social discrimination.

Social factors highlight the complexity of our identities as human beings. Ideologies of gender, class, age and race converge in our lives to either empower or disempower us. They determine whether we are heard or not heard, when we speak; they enable us to carry out our decisions or stop us from learning how to decide for ourselves. This complexity also means that we are never entirely powerless or always powerful. Rather, certain categories of our identity may give us power in some places and circumstances, while other categories disempower us.³ Some people, however, have social approval on their side, while others have more disempowering pieces within their identity. For example, a woman who is from a high class, white race and respected nation is much better in many societies than a woman who is from a low class, despised ethnic group and colour.

To illustrate how the ideology of gender and race are handled in religious texts, we shall focus on three stories in the book of Genesis: those of Abraham, Lot, and Noah. How then is gender visible in the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac? How does gender work with other social categories of oppression, such as racism?

In this story, we meet Sarah, who is identified by her gender role as the wife of Abraham. She is upset by her incapacity to fulfil one of her major gender roles – namely, mothering. She approaches Abraham with a plan: that Abraham should “go in to” her slave-girl, Hagar, so that Hagar may bear children for Abraham. It does not occur to Sarah that Abraham may be the cause of their lack of children. This is in line not only with many other biblical stories, but the social thinking of many societies – that is, infertility is usually associated with women rather than men.

Hagar, the second woman in this story, is Sarah’s unmarried “Egyptian slave-girl”. That status puts her into a different, despised race and lower class. Thus, when Sarah wants children, she makes a plan and discusses it with Abraham, but does not bother to consult Hagar about the idea. After Sarah speaks to Abraham, “he went in to Hagar and she conceived.” We do not hear whether Hagar agreed or not. However, once she bore Ishmael, Hagar was no longer just a powerless slave girl. She had power over Sarah: that of having fulfilled the social expectations of mothering. Hagar used this power and looked upon Sarah with contempt, something that Sarah did not accept. She complained to Abraham, who reminded her that she held a class power

³Mary Ann Tolbert, “Poetics and Politics of Location,” in *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 305-317.

over Hagar: "Your slave-girl is in your power: do to her as you please" (Gen.16:6). Sarah then has leave to mistreat her slave and eventually Hagar runs away.

But then an angel of the Lord appears and tells Hagar: "Return to your mistress and submit to her" (Gen.16:11). This command from a divine character brings a religious legitimization to social oppression. That is, God seemingly allows class oppression; God allows slavery. Hagar is comforted by the fact that she and her son will be blessed, for the angel says Ishmael's offspring will be greatly multiplied; but we must note that they will be descendants of slaves, who must submit. So while both Hagar and Sarah are women, relegated to the roles of wife and mother, Hagar suffers also for being a slave (low class) and for being different from Sarah (Egyptian). Finally, Sarah bears a son, Isaac, and decides she does not wish her son to share inheritance with Ishmael, the son of a slave. Hagar has lost her mothering power over Sarah. Not even submission will save Hagar and Ishmael: Sarah has fulfilled her role of mothering and does not need Hagar anymore. Abraham is grieved, not for Hagar, but rather for Ishmael, his son. Once again, a divine character comes into the story, namely God. God speaks to the distressed Abraham, saying: "Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you" (Gen.21:13). The divine character (God) essentially repeats the previous angel's reassurances to Hagar: "As for the son of the slave woman" (Gen.21: 12,13). After that, Abraham dismisses Hagar and Ishmael, with nothing but "bread and a skin of water" (Ge. 21:14).

Sarah's wishes are respected – Ishmael and Hagar have no share in the property of Abraham, which is reserved for Isaac. Second, Hagar's dismissal means that the offspring of Ishmael, which shall be a nation, are not named after Abraham. Rather, they shall be known as the offspring of a slave woman, who obeyed an angel of the Lord and was then thrown out of the house with the full blessing of God but without any inheritance. In Gen. 25:12,18, the descendants of Ishmael are outlined, and scholars hold that "while some of the names are unknown ... other identifications have been made with Arabian tribal groups to the East and South of Canaan".⁴

Clearly, equal power has not been given to the two nations whose origin is traced to Ishmael, the son of a slave woman, and Isaac, the son of the legitimate wife. This inequality is religiously blessed by the appearance of an angel of God sanctioning first the submission of Hagar and, later, her dismissal. The same ideology of inequality between different nations is also evident in the story of Noah's sons and Lot and his daughters. It also propounds an ideology that legitimizes the oppression of the nation, which is characterized negatively. But before we turn to these other examples, it is important that we should scrutinize the gender roles of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac and how they interact with other social categories of identity.

⁴T. E. Fretheim "Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentaries*, Vol. 1, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 515.

Gender, Race, and Identity

In the story of Abraham, the writer seemingly presents him as unconcerned about a son. It seems it is all Sarah's concern and worry. Abraham seems to helplessly obey his wife – first, to go in to the slave girl; second, to remind Sarah that she is still the mistress over Hagar, and third, to reluctantly throw the slave girl out. Sarah seems to wield a great deal of power. But the reader must not forget three things: first, her power only extends over the private sphere of her home. Second, her son will bear, not her name, but Abraham's; and her son will be the one to inherit Abraham's property. Third, the gender stereotype of associating women with jealousy and evil informs this story, but veils the fact that jealousy and competitiveness amongst women is usually an indication of their lack of power and their dependence on men (husbands, fathers, sons and bosses at work). In short, Sarah's concerns are to fulfil Abraham's unspoken desires; that is, Abraham needs a son to carry his name and to inherit his property (Genesis 15:1-6). Lastly, it is Abraham who is promised a nation through Isaac, not Sarah; it is Isaac who inherits property, not Sarah. So power is hardly in the hands of Sarah, despite the presentation of the story.

Notably, Ishmael and Isaac, the offspring of Abraham, are both sons; no daughters are mentioned here. They are both promised nations: "their offspring will be greatly multiplied," but they shall be distinct. Second, they are property inheritors, but we see that class militates against Ishmael: although he is male and shall be a father of nations, he is denied his inheritance along with Abraham's name. This inequality serves to legitimize racism against – in the sense of looking down upon – the nation of Ishmael. The story of Abraham is certainly not written from the perspective of Ishmael and his descendants, but from the other side: that of Isaac and his descendants. It is thus the Isaac camp that "possesses the power to define rights, duties and liberties; to legitimize ideologies, theologies and systems of value; to assign myths to various members of the human family, which in turn, invariably divide human ontology between persons and non-persons".⁵ In this story, Isaac and his descendants are "persons" while Ishmael and his descendants are "non-persons." The Isaac camp presents itself, while the Ishmael camp is represented by those who are in power; those who seek to keep them powerless – the tellers of the story.

A pattern of using religious stories to advance ideologies of gender and racial inequality is also evident in the stories of Noah and Lot. Randy Bailey's excellent article, "They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives," explores both of these stories, showing how they sanction the discrimination (and even annihilation) of one nation over the other.⁶ A brief narration of these stories will illustrate the point.

⁵Cannon, "Racism", 175

⁶Randall C. Bailey, "They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Narrative" in *Reading From This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, Vol. 1, ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 137-8.

Noah and His Three Sons

The story of Noah and his three sons (Shem, Ham and Japheth) is found in Genesis 9:18-28:

These were the three sons of Noah; and from these, the whole earth was peopled. Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said: "Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers." He also said, "Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave."

What starts off as a story about a family, spirals to cover nations and the identity or origins of all people: "from these the whole earth was peopled." The story makes no pretence about giving equal power to all peoples of the earth, who all originate from Noah, the survivor of the flood. Rather, the story openly legitimizes the oppression of one nation by the other. Ham is named as the father of Canaan and cursed to be a slave of Shem. The descendants of Ham are further identified as "Cush, Egypt and Put and Canaan" (Gen.10:6). The descendants of Shem are outlined in Genesis 11:10-26, which ends by saying he became the father of Abram (Abraham), the husband of Sarah.

Bailey's article notes: "Israel is totally to be identified with Shem, the one who took the lead in covering up Noah, the one to whom Canaan is to be a slave, the one whose God YHWH is to be blessed".⁷ Not only does this story legitimize the dispossession, annihilation and subordination of Canaanites in the biblical text, it was also used in the apartheid regime to legitimize the oppression of black people by white South Africans.

Lot and His Two Daughters

The story of Lot and his daughters, found in Genesis 12-19, is closely linked with Abraham's story. When God first called Abraham to leave his country and travel to a land that will be shown to him, (Gen.12:10), Abraham brought along his brother's son, Lot. They became wandering pastoralists together until they parted ways. Lot travelled to Sodom and Gomorrah, where the Lord ordered him to leave these two cities as they would be destroyed. On the night of the destruction, Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt, while Lot fled to Zoar with his two daughters. The story goes on to say:

So he lived in a cave with his two daughters. And the first born said to the younger; "Our father is old and there is no man on earth to come in to us... Come let us make our father drink wine and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve our offspring through

⁷Bailey, 137

our father. So they made their father drink wine that night. And the first one went in ... the younger rose and lay with him and he did not know when she lay with him; and when she rose. Thus both daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The first born bore a son and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day. The younger one also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites to this day (Gen.19:30.38).

There are multiple similarities here to the story of Abraham. Two women are sexually involved with one man, Lot, and they both bear sons. The women are concerned with descendants, but Lot remains silent. They plot, just like Sarah, and bring forth two sons. Lot, like Abraham, seems to be a victim of two women. He does not know anything – he is sent to sleep with strong drink and raped by his daughters. As Bailey correctly notes, a remarkable thing happens here: Lot is so drunk that he does not know or remember anything, but lo and behold, “he does perform!”⁸ Both daughters get pregnant; they both give birth to sons. But unlike the story of Abraham, they are not his wives: they are his daughters.

As in the story of Abraham and Noah, the sons create nations/ethnic groups – Moabites and Ammonites. But there is an important difference to this story: as Bailey convincingly argues, they “label within the consciousness of the reader the view of these nations as nothing more than incestuous bastards”.⁹ Bailey goes on to show how this narrated origin of Moabites and Ammonites is used in the biblical books to exclude, humiliate and sanction their annihilation (2 Samuel 8:2; 2 Samuel 12:26.31, Judges 11; 2 Samuel 10 & 12). Bailey’s argument is that this story makes the marginalization and discrimination of Amorites and Israelites acceptable to the reader.

Conclusions

These three stories are just a sample of how the ideology of gender and racism can be legitimized through religion. There are many other stories of origin and identity not found in religious texts, which also propound ideologies of inequality and authorize marginalization. All such stories, wherever and whenever they are told, present the reader with values that normalize discrimination.

Since stories are central to our lives, have structures that protect them, and we continue to tell them – all of which ensures that they will go on influencing social values, identity and worlds – how can we arrest their negative ideologies? Feminists and liberation readers have offered many suggestions and strategies, such as:

Readers must scrutinize and expose the ideology of every story. That is, they must ask what values are propounded insofar as race, class, age, ethnicity, gender and nationhood are concerned. Where a text propounds a dangerous ideology to some people in society, it must be named as such.

⁸Bailey, 129

⁹Bailey, 131

Writers and readers must allow those groups that are often marginalized, whose stories are excluded from official documents and institutions, to tell their own stories of origin, self-identity and power. This is because the stories of the oppressed are often told by their oppressors, who seek to keep them discriminated.

Socially empowered, human rights informed storytellers today have an obligation to create new stories: stories that respect and uphold the rights of all. This includes reinterpreting the old, discriminative stories to empower people of all ages, ethnicities, races, genders, classes and nations.

Governments, non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the private sector and their institutions, can and must use their positions of power to promote the human rights of all. They can do this by ensuring that stories involving legitimate racism and gender discrimination are illegal, and by teaching others to promote and respect human rights.

Perhaps most important of all, religious leaders must begin asserting that all forms of life and people are sacred.

With some of these strategies put in place, we can begin to spin and consume stories and interpretations of stories that respect and celebrate our diversity as women and men, as black, white and yellow people; as people of different sexual orientations, ages, ethnicities, disabilities, nations, regions, religions and classes, without ever reducing our humanity or leaving us open to exploitation and marginalization.

The power is in our hands to shape a just world for ourselves.

The time to use that power is now.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Reading and Understanding the Bible as an African

James N. Amanze

Introduction

One of the most contentious issues in the missionary field over the years has been the relationship between the Bible and African culture. In a number of instances, the Bible has been set against everything and anything African, on the assumption that the African way of life is ungodly and evil and that the African must give up his/her beliefs and practices in order to be truly Christian. Christian preaching and teaching emphasizes that Africans must renounce totally their past, which keeps them in bondage to Satan, and embrace the saving power of God as contained in both the Old and New Testament.

This at once raises a number of pertinent questions. Is it possible to read and understand the Bible as an African? Is the Bible antagonistic to African culture? Will reading and understanding the Bible as an African lead to syncretism—a combination of beliefs that will be contrary to orthodox Christian teaching?

In this chapter it will be argued that it is possible to read and understand the Bible as an African. The missionary approach that presented the Bible and African culture as enemies has alienated many people in Africa, and is one of the factors¹ that led many African people to form their own independent churches in order to experience and practice Christianity in the context of their culture. It will further be argued that the Bible is not an enemy of the African culture. Rather, the Holy Scriptures and African culture are soulmates.

The Human Face of the Holy Scriptures

The Bible is held, by both Roman Catholics and Protestants, to be the inspired, authoritative living word of God. According to Michael Ramsey, in the first century of the Christian era, Christians used language that ascribed high authority to the books of the Bible. The books

¹See for example, J. N. Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana*, Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989 where this has been discussed in detail.

were described by the early Fathers as “holy scriptures”, “sacred books”, “sacred writings”, “divine scriptures” and as written by divine inspiration. They believed the Holy Spirit prompted and directed the authors to write as they did. Consequently, the Bible is viewed as *sui generis*—unique—and possessing divine authority.²

In this chapter, while we agree, entirely, that the Bible is the word of God, we also contend, under the theory of dual authorship, that the Bible is a product of human culture. Apart from being the living Word of God for all times and all ages, it is also a record of the religious experiences of the Jewish people. This represents the human face of the Bible and provides a link between the Word of God as found in Scriptures and African culture. The historical-critical approach to the Hebrew Bible reveals the crucial role that people of African descent played in the formation of the Holy Scriptures and the origin and development of Salvation History. Norman K. Gottwald, in his book *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction*, observes that the basic assumption of the historical-critical method is that the religious aspect of life, however “supernatural” it claims to be in its orthodox Jewish and Christian versions, is similar to all other aspects of life in being historical and developmental. According to Gottwald, “religious ideas and practices arise, gain dominance, change, combine, mutually interact, decline and die out. As with everything human, religious phenomena have a history”.³ This means that the Bible, in order to be understood clearly and authentically, must be placed in its historical context as a piece of literature whose religious ideas and practices belong to a particular group of people at a particular time and place as expressed in these particular writings.⁴ This is in line with James K. West’s contention that the Bible, like other books, is a product of the people whose origins and history it records.⁵

The Centrality of the Bible in African Christianity

The Bible is the greatest gift that the missionaries brought to Africa. Its centrality in African Christianity is beyond dispute. Christianity has taken root and has spread rapidly in Africa on the wings of the Bible. During the colonial period the Bible was presented to the Africans in the languages of their colonial masters: Latin, English, French, Finnish, Dutch, German, Afrikaans, Portuguese, and Spanish. These foreign languages, and the Eurocentric way of interpreting the Holy Scriptures, made the Bible difficult to understand for African converts. The interpretation of the Bible was solely the prerogative of the missionaries and of those whom they equipped with the skills of reading the alphabet and, eventually, of the Bible itself. As a result, the growth of Christianity south of the Sahara was slow and tedious. In time, however, missionaries began to translate the Bible into local languages, allowing African converts to read and understand it in their own terms.

²A. M. Ramsey, “The Authority of the Bible” in *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*, ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley (Ontario: Thomas Nelson, 1977), 1.

³Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: a socio-literary introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 10-11.

⁴Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 11.

⁵J. K. West, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1981), 29-30.

Mbiti reminds us that the first translation of the Bible took place in Africa: the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in Alexandria, Egypt, in the third century BC. It came to be known as the Septuagint, and was the definitive Bible of the early Church. After this, translations were also made in Coptic and Ethiopian languages, and from there into numerous African languages. In modern times, this trend has gained momentum. The Bible has now been translated into many African languages, allowing Africans to read it in their mother tongue. This development has brought new insights to African converts. Now the Bible is not only able to speak directly to them, but does so in a language that they understand and cherish. Scholars generally agree that there is a close link between the tremendous expansion of Christianity in Africa and the translation of the Bible into African languages.⁶

Mbiti asks, “What do African Christians see or find in the Bible?” He answers: “... in their own language the Bible becomes at once a living book, very different from other books ... Africans hear and see a confirmation of their own cultural, social and religious life in the life and history of the Jewish people as portrayed and recorded in the pages of the Bible ... Africans feel that their own lives are described in the Bible, they as human beings are affirmed in it and that they belong to the world of the Bible ... It is a living portrait of their culture and experiences, of their history and geography, of their fears and expectations and of their spiritual longings.”⁷ Martin Ott has echoed a similar view:

The Old Testament reads like a detailed description of what can be found even now in many African cultures and societies. The Jews originally recognised lineages or clan groups ... Their prayers invoked the supreme God through the names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—the founding ancestors. They sacrificed animals and poured libations, and they had a tribal mark, circumcision, Judaic notions of pollution and taboos about women are seen almost everywhere in African cultures. Their practices associated with marriage—polygamy and levirate unions—are common enough in various ethnic groups in Africa.⁸

It should be noted, as we shall see later in this chapter, that the close resemblance between Jewish and African world views has made the Bible, especially the Old Testament, look like a compendium of African ways of life. Various aspects of African culture noted in the Bible by the African people, has made it easier for them to accept Christianity without strong resistance. Today Christianity is so entrenched in Africa that Thomas C. Oden in his book titled *How Africa shaped the Christian mind: rediscovering the African seedbed of western Christianity* has suggested that Christianity should be considered one of the indigenous religions of Africa.⁹ This suggestion, however, is difficult to accept since Christianity was brought to Africa by

⁶J. S. Mbiti, *Bible and theology in African Christianity* (East and Central Africa: Oxford University Press, 1987), 22.

⁷*Ibid.*, 26-7.

⁸M. Ott, *African theology in images* (Blantyre: Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 2000), 45.

⁹Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa shaped the Christian mind: rediscovering the African seedbed of western Christianity* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 93.

missionaries and is still tightly bound in European and American garments despite its long presence on the African continent!

The tremendous growth of Christian churches in Africa should be attributed, in part, to the dialogue between the Bible and African Traditional Religions. Contrary to the views that were held by some missionaries in the missionary field such as Robert Moffat and others, which presented African world views and religious beliefs, values and practices as diabolic¹⁰, African Traditional Religions have provided a fertile ground for spreading the teachings of the Bible. As Mbiti has pointed out, many Africans converted to Christianity without any sense of spiritual loss. Instead, by embracing the teachings of the Bible, they gained a new insight into their spirituality.¹¹ “The chief new element brought to African religiosity by biblical teaching,” Mbiti writes, “is the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel. Western missionaries did not introduce God to Africa—rather it was God who brought them to Africa as carriers of news about Jesus Christ.”¹²

This is in line with Thomas C. Oden’s contention that the assumption that there is a fundamental incompatibility between African Traditional Religion and Christianity has been proved wrong by millions of living African Christians. According to Oden, “the sweeping flow of African Christian missions is evidence enough of the fact that vital scriptural Christianity has in fact found a true home deep in Africa for a much longer period of time than has modern capitalism or Marxism or secularism. The evidence overwhelms all ambiguity”.¹³ Oden has noted further that from the first century of its existence, Christianity has been welcomed enthusiastically in Africa, and that the exuberance of this welcome is uniquely characteristic of African community life.¹⁴

The Bible and African Culture: Natural Allies or Enemies?

As noted above, for centuries Africans have been told that the Bible and African culture are as distant from one another as the North Pole is from the South Pole. In this chapter it is argued that this is not the case: that the Bible and African culture are, in fact, natural allies. The work of systematic theologians, biblical scholars and historians has established that there is an affinity between the Bible and African culture, and that people of African descent directly participated in the making of the Bible as the Word of God. We shall now turn our attention to examine these claims.

¹⁰ See *seedbed of western Christianity* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 93.J. N. Amanze, *A history of the Ecumenical movement in Africa*, Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999, pp. 135-148 where this has been discussed in detail.

¹¹ Mbiti, *Bible and theology*, 11-12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³ Oden, *How Africa shaped the Christian mind*, 95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Cultural Affinity Between African Culture And The Bible

When Africans read the Bible, especially the Old Testament, they discover many similarities between the beliefs and practices described in the Old Testament and African beliefs and practices such as belief in one God, belief in ancestors and many others.. Two theories attempt to explain this: the first states that the similarities between some African religious practices and those found in the Old Testament may come from an encounter between Africans and the Jews of the Diaspora. According to this theory, Africans came under the influence of Jewish culture as a result of the fall in ancient Israel of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C. and the Southern Kingdom in 587 B.C.. Both of these events led to the relocation of Jews to many parts of the world. By the 4th century B.C., the Jews of the Diaspora had established themselves throughout the Near East, in Egypt, North Africa and Sudan, as far as Ethiopia. Their beliefs could well have influenced their neighbours, including the African people.¹⁵

The second theory traces a common descent, based on contemporary archaeological findings, between the Jews and the African people. According to this theory, Africa should be considered the birthplace of humankind, since the earliest and first human (*homo sapiens*) was discovered in East Africa in the Lake Rudolf region in Kenya. All humans would have migrated throughout the world from that single geographic point. This view has, in recent years, found support in another dramatic fossil discovery in South Africa. In December 1999, Dr. Ron Clarke announced the excavation of a complete arm and hand of an *Australopithecus* ape-man, believed to be 3.3 million years old, at the Sterkfontein caves in Gauteng. This discovery further boosted Africa's claims of being the cradle of humankind. Under this theory, Africa is directly connected to very ancient secular and religious civilizations, and most of the Old Testament developed from African roots. This, as we shall see later, is supported by the many biblical passages, both in the Old and New Testaments, which make references to Ethiopia and Egypt. The term "Egypt" was once used to mean all of Africa, also called the "Land of Ham." This theory further asserts that ancient historians such as Flavius Josephus, Celus, Plutarch, Tacitus, Eusebius and Diodorus have intimated that the original Hebrews were a group of Ethiopian and Egyptian captives who were forced to leave Egypt and migrate to Canaan.¹⁶

Either theory shows that the early Hebrew people had considerable African blood in their veins, and that their culture was imbued with African cultural values, some of which are distinct in the pages of the Holy Scriptures. By most accounts the interaction between the Hebrew people and the African peoples has been very close indeed.' This is in line with Thomas Oden's hypothesis that Judaism and Christianity have their roots in the story of a people formed in the interface between Africa on the one hand and Asia on the

¹⁵Ype Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing: the History and Role of the Bible in frica* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 4-5

¹⁶C. H. Felder, ed., *The Original African Heritage Study Bible: King James Version with special annotations relative to the African/Edenic perspective* (Nashville: James C. Winston, 1993), 102. See also *The Economist*, "Another dramatic fossil find in South Africa", Gaborone: 22-26, December 1999, 6.

other.¹⁷ It also accounts, to some extent, for the specific similarities that we find in the religious cultures to which we now turn our attention.

The High God

The concept of a High God similar to, but not identical with, the Hebrew deity as described in Deut.6:4 has been prevalent in most African societies. For example, one of the most fundamental characteristics of the African peoples' concept of God is the absence of graven images. Within the many diverse tribes of Africa, there are no known instances of physical representation of the High God. Tribal belief states that God is spirit and must be worshipped as such. This matches up to the Old Testament Law admonishing ancient Israel not to make any graven image or likeness of anything that is in heaven above, the earth beneath, or the water under the earth, and forbade them to bow down upon or serve such a likeness (Ex.20:4-5). Many African peoples also have creation stories strikingly similar to the Biblical version. The Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle, for instance, reports that the Chewa people, who live in Likoma Island in the present day Malawi, had in their folklore a story similar to that of the Garden of Eden. According to the story, in the beginning when God created the world he also created a man and a woman and placed them in a garden as brother and sister. The story is silent on whether they had any children possibly because among the Chewa incest is strongly frowned upon. I am, however, inclined to think that they did since this is how the world was populated. What is interesting is that when Bishop Chauncy Maples of the Anglican Church preached for the first time on Likoma Island and narrated the story of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:5-25), the people were amazed and said to him, "that is exactly what we have been taught at the initiation ceremony (*nkhole*) by our elders".¹⁸ He was also surprised to hear about this story from the people who had never been exposed to Christianity before!

Ancestorhood

Coupled with the belief in a creator God is the concept of ancestorhood. This concept is prevalent in the Old Testament. Yahweh revealed himself to Moses through the burning bush on Mount Horeb as the God of the fathers. In Exodus 3:16, God tells Moses: "Go, and gather the elders of Israel, and say unto them, *The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob* (my emphasis), appeared to me, saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt." Allusions to ancestorhood are made in many parts of the Old Testament. Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke begin with the genealogy of Jesus, traced back as far as Abraham in Matthew (Mt.1:1-17) and as far back as Adam, the first son of God, in Luke (Lk.3:23-38). Practically everywhere in Africa, ancestorhood plays a significant role; it is a symbol of identity, and ancestors provide channels of communication between the living and the Living God. Ancestors are also considered guardians of public morality.

¹⁷Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 14-16.

¹⁸*The Nyasaland Diocesan Chronicle*, 1916, 26.

Circumcision

In addition, circumcision stood at the centre of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and His people. To the people of ancient Israel, this ritual reaffirmed and verified the covenant between Yahweh and the Hebrew people. Beginning with Abraham (Gen.17:9-27), circumcision has been the hallmark of the Jewish people as a kingdom of priests, a holy nation and God's chosen ones. (Ex.19:5-6). In the Old Testament, the significance of circumcision was so great that an Israelite could be cut off from the covenant if he was not circumcised, on the understanding that he disobeyed God's law (Ex.4:25-26).¹⁹ In Africa, circumcision has been practised from time immemorial as a school for moral education and preparation for both fatherhood and motherhood. In many African societies, circumcision is a symbol of identity with the tribe, linking the living with the living-dead and those yet to be born. It inaugurates a transition from childhood to adulthood, just as the sacrament of baptism marks the beginning of a new life through the symbolism of death and resurrection in the baptismal water.

Sacrifices

The religious system of the Hebrew people was dominated by sacrifices and offerings. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew people made sacrifices to Yahweh as part of their worship. They had different types of sacrifice, such as burnt offerings (Lev. 1:3), peace offerings (Lev.3:1), sin offerings (Lev.4:24) and others. The book of Leviticus contains minute details on how these were made. Similarly, sacrifices and offerings occupy a very important place in the worship of many African societies. Schaaf reports that in the countryside around Lake Chad, a very interesting discovery was made among the Massana people. When the Lutheran missionary Ravne began to translate the Old Testament into their language he discovered, much to his amazement, that the Massana people had exactly the same sacrifices as those described in the Bible in the book of Leviticus.²⁰

The Significance of Blood

Another of the dominant elements in the sacrifices of the Old Testament is the religious significance of blood. In the early Hebrew religion, blood was a symbol of life, and quite often it was used to bind God and His people together in a covenant. Blood played a significant role in the sealing of the Sinai/Horeb Covenant between Yahweh and His people, as recorded in Exodus 24:7-8. Similarly, in many African societies blood plays a very important role: it is customary to pour, place or sprinkle blood as a symbol of life upon altars, shrines or other sacred places during religious ceremonies. This is intended to please the ancestors and other deities, which are concerned with the affairs of humankind.

Ritual Purifications

The Hebrew religion is characterized, to a great extent, by purification rites. One of the most outstanding institutions given to the children of Israel by Yahweh was that they should

¹⁹ Felder, *The Original African Heritage*, 24.

²⁰ Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing*, 4.

be holy and sanctified to God at all times. Cleanliness was one of the factors that enabled the Hebrews to remain pure in the sight of God. Purification rites ensured that the people were protected from sickness and diseases common in many societies. There are purification rites after birth, death and during menstruation periods (Lev.5:3-12; 10:10; 12:1-8). A number of scholars have observed that there are great similarities between Hebrew purification rites and those practised in many African societies after child birth, death, puberty, harvest and other ritual occasions. During many years of research among the Batswana people in Botswana and the Chewa people in Malawi, I came across many purification rites intended to enhance public morality and bring the spiritual and physical worlds together.²¹

Religious Functionaries

In addition, there appear to be great similarities between African and Biblical culture in the area of religious functionaries. For instance, some scholars maintain that the Aaronic priesthood, as described in Ex. 28:1-3, has a great deal in common with the priesthood system found in a number of African countries. Among the Grebo people of Sierra Leone, for example, the chief priest, who bears the title “*bodia*”, has been compared to the High Priest of the Hebrews in the story of Aaron. He is normally appointed in accordance with the prophecy of an oracle. Like in the Aaronic priesthood, the “*bodia*” is anointed at an elaborate ceremony during which the priest is given an anklet to wear as a badge of his priestly office, and the door posts of his house are sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificed goat.²²

Plural Marriages

Plural marriages—involving two or more wives—is endemic in the Old Testament; the earliest such example is the marriage of Lamech to Adah and Zillah (Gen. 4:19). Many male polygamists found favour in the sight of God: for instance, Abraham (Gen. 16:15), Esau (Gen. 26:25; 28:9), Jacob (Gen. 29:16-30; 30:3-9), Gideon (Judges 8:30) and Elkana (1 Sam. 1:2). Among the kings, David (1 Sam. 18:27; 2 Sam. 5:13-16; 11:15, 27) and Solomon (1 Kings 11:3) had several wives. At the time of Moses, polygamy was legislated as a social and legal institution (Deut. 21:15).

Polygamous marriages are found all over Africa, though in some societies it is less commonly practised than others. Common belief holds that the more wives a man has, the more children he is likely to have, and greater is his promise of immortality. He is reborn in the multitude of his descendants, and many will remember him after he has entered his spiritual immortality. Among many African societies, as well, the head of a big family earns great respect simply because they are ensuring the survival of their community.²³

²¹For detailed accounts of purification rites, read J. N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religion in Malawi: the case of the Bimbi Cult* (Blantyre [Malawi]: CLAIM, 2002) and J. N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religion and culture in Botswana* (Gaborone, Botswana: Pula Press, 2002).

²²Felder, *The original African heritage*, 131.

²³Felder, *The original African heritage*, 131.

Agricultural Rites

Agriculture was one of the main economic activities of the Hebrew people, especially after their settlement in the Promised Land. Their agricultural activities were surrounded with religious rituals to enhance the fertility of the land and to thank Yahweh, who gave them rain and made the land fertile. One of the many religious festivals observed by the Hebrews was the first fruits as described in Lev. 23:10. When the early Hebrews harvested their first crops of the season, the first fruits of that harvest were sanctified to God, a long established practice among many African peoples. African societies often have agricultural rites associated with the ploughing season, testing of the first fruits and thanksgiving festivals after harvesting. In Botswana, for example, people observe *letsema* (to start ploughing the fields), *molomo* (the tasting of first fruits) and *dikgafela* (thanksgiving festival for rain after harvest).²⁴

Worship

Yet another similarity between African and Hebrew culture is in the area of worship. When the children of Israel carried the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, King David and the people of Israel took with them musical instruments and played, sang and danced with all their might (2 Sam. 6:12-15; 2 Chron. 15: 28-29). Music and dance were very important parts of worship for the Hebrews. Psalm 150 enumerates the various instruments that the Hebrew people used for the worship of Yahweh. Similarly, dancing, singing and clapping of hands form a very important part of the religious worship of many African people.

Religious Symbolism

Also of great interest is the parallel between Hebrew and African religious symbolism. In the Old Testament, for example, serpents appear to have some religious significance, and are endowed with mysterious powers. The blame for the fall of Adam and Eve, and indeed of humanity as a whole, is placed squarely on the serpent that persuaded Eve to sin. In this case, serpents are a symbol of evil, but at other times seem to represent divinity. References are often made to the rod of Moses, which was turned into a snake as a symbol of divine power (Ex. 7:8-13). Similarly, snake-spirits feature prominently in the rain cults of the Chewa and Tumbuka peoples, who live in the present day Malawi. H. L. Vail, for instance, has indicated that the Tumbuka believed in the existence of a snake spirit called *Chikang'ombe*, who controlled the local rains. When he was content the rain fell abundantly and the land was fruitful; when angry he could be malevolent, withholding the rain and thus inflicting a punishment on the people because of their wrongdoing.²⁵

²⁴J. N. Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana: the case of African independent churches* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1998), 27-33.

²⁵H. L. Vail, "Religion, Language and Tribal Myth: The Tumbuka and the Chewa", in J. M. Schoffeleers (ed.), *Guardians of the Land: essays on Central African territorial cults* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1979), 214.

Divination

Another interesting feature in early Hebrew religious life was the role played by divination. Quite often the Old Testament speaks of religious functionaries such as diviners, dreamers, seers and sorcerers (Jer. 27:9) believed to have some supernatural powers which are not possessed by other people. These religious personalities were consulted in times of need in order to provide spiritual answers to baffling problems of human existence. Likewise, the existence of diviners, rainmakers, spirit mediums, herbalists and the like in African societies is widespread.

Fire

More similarities are found between Hebrew and African cultures regarding the religious significance of fire. Throughout the history of the Israelite religion, fire has been considered an agent of purification (Jer. 23:29); even God's presence came in the form of a pillar of fire (Ex. 13:21). Fire was used in burnt offerings so that the fragrant smell of the sacrifice could please Yahweh. In most parts of Africa, fire has from time immemorial held religious meaning. For example, the Herero, who live in present day Namibia, keep a sacred fire in holy places; they consider this fire to be a gift from God, one to which the welfare of their entire people is intimately connected. It symbolizes for them national life, prosperity and a means of contact with the unseen world. Similarly, harvest ceremonies among the Nandi people in East Africa involve the lighting of sacred fires and prayers for the welfare of both people and cattle.²⁶

Dreams

Finally, this section on the similarities between the cultural milieu of the Bible and that of African people would be incomplete without mentioning the similarities surrounding the religious meaning of dreams and their impact in the life of the individual and society. Dreams, especially their interpretation, occupied a place of great importance in the religion of ancient Israel (Gen.20:3; 28:12-13; 37:5-11). Likewise, in Africa dreams are considered to have great religious value. In many African societies, the spirits of the ancestors communicate with the living through dreams, and inspire the work of diviners, rainmakers, priests and medicine men by imparting divine information.

The Contribution Of African Culture In The Making Of The Bible

Apart from the striking similarities that we find in the cultures of the Bible and the African people, there has been an amazing discovery in modern times which shows that people of the African descent actually participated directly in the making of the Bible and Salvation History. Africa and Africans feature prominently in the accounts of both the Old and New Testaments. For example, contrary to the conservative, fundamentalist attitude which views African culture as an enemy of the Christian faith, there is ample evidence that African people have, from the beginning of the biblical times, actively participated in God's saving acts as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It is noteworthy that Africans, as a specific

²⁶Felder, *The original African heritage*, 171.

cultural group, are mentioned in the sacred writings, thus making the case for reading and understanding the Bible as an African not only stronger, but also a divine imperative.

To begin with, Africa, not Europe or America, appears in the story of creation; the source of the Nile River is located in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2: 10-13). The Old Testament frequently mentions Cush (Ethiopia) and Egypt. After his call, Abraham lived in Egypt for sometime before he finally settled in the land of Canaan (Gen. 12: 10-20). Jacob and his sons sought refuge in Egypt to escape the ravages of drought and famine in the Promised Land (Gen. 42-50). African presence is recorded in the land of Canaan, during both the period of the Patriarchs and afterwards, as major elements in the Egyptian army, which was stationed there. Robert A. Bennett has noted that the early fourteenth century B.C. Amarna Letters (correspondence from Canaanite kings to Pharaoh Akhnaton in Egypt) testify to the early African presence there. According to Bennett, one letter, from a certain Abdu-heba, king of pre-Israelite Jerusalem, complained of the rebellious Nubian troops, which were garrisoned in the land of Canaan.²⁷

It was in Egypt that the Israelite people were born as a nation through the Exodus event (Ex. 1-15). Moses may have been an Afro-Asiatic; after all, he was born in Egypt and raised up as an African by the daughter of Pharaoh in Pharaoh's court (Ex. 2: 1-10). To Moses is credited the authorship of the Pentateuch, the most sacred literature of the Hebrew Bible. At one point he married an Ethiopian woman (Num. 12:1-10), which created division between himself and his sister Miriam and his brother Aaron. Later in Israelite history, Nubian/Cushite soldiers became part of King David's forces, which captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites and seem to have remained part of Jerusalem's militia, which David incorporated as his own.²⁸

People of African descent were indeed at the centre of salvation history within the Bible itself. The Queen of Sheba who visited King Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-10; 2 Chron. 9: 1-9) was a black African from Ethiopia. King Solomon was captivated by her beauty; he entered into an intimate relationship with her and gave her a son who eventually became the ruler of Ethiopia. The last Emperor of Ethiopia claimed direct descent from this union.²⁹ Down the road in Israelite history, Africans seem to have been extremely active in the religious and political life of the Jewish people. For example, during the time of King Hezekiah of Judah, Israel forged a close alliance with Egypt at the time when it was being ruled by the Nubians (751-656) in a common effort to avert being captured by the Assyrians, who were carving out an empire for themselves. Africans were also active in prophetic circles. For instance, an African court official named Ebed-melek (Jer. 38: 7-13) saved prophet Jeremiah from death under King Zedekiah. Prophet Zephania is called "son of Cush" (Zeph. 1: 1), possibly an indication that his mother was an African. The wisdom tradition also reveals that much of the wisdom of Israel was directly borrowed from Egypt. For example, the book of Proverbs is said to have been modelled upon the Egyptian

²⁷Robert A. Bennett, "Africa", in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger & M. D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 11.

²⁸Bennett, "Africa", 11.

²⁹Schaaf, *On their way rejoicing*, 3.

“Instructions of Amen-em-opet”.³⁰ Similarly, the Old Testament portrays Ethiopia as a place which would soon experience conversion because the Ethiopians were inclined to Yahweh worship (Ps. 68:31; Isaiah 11:11; 18:7, Zeph. 3:10).

In the New Testament, Africa and African people also feature significantly. For instance, when Herod was seeking to destroy Jesus, his mother fled with him to Egypt (Mt. 2: 13-23). Simon of Cyrene (Mt. 27:32), an African, helped Jesus Christ to carry his cross on the way to Calvary (Mk. 15: 21). Acts 8: 26-40 mention a black queen (Kandake) of the Nubians in the ancient Ethiopian Capital of Meroe. The Ethiopian eunuch in her court, who was baptized by Philip the evangelist, must have been the first African Christian convert, who eventually planted Christianity in Ethiopia—Africa.

Reading and Understanding the Bible as an African

Reading and understanding the Bible from an African perspective is a methodological approach of Biblical interpretation. Robert Morgan and John Barton have indicated that “interpretation is an intermediate task performed by rational human beings to make human communication possible in difficult cases. In interpreting, we first understand the human utterance and then elucidate it for ourselves or someone else ... Interpreters often say something quite different in order to get across the meaning of an utterance”.³¹

Morgan and Barton have pointed out that the medium of human communication is normally language. They have further observed that Biblical texts are both human communications to humans and divine communications to humans. On both accounts there is a wide scope for disagreement concerning the meanings of the messages. According to Morgan and Barton, human thought and language are always implicit and provide the baseline for interpretation.³²

There are a number of problems that make reading and understanding the Bible a difficult task for many people. It has been noted, for example, that the original languages of the Bible namely Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) are not easily understood by modern people. In addition, lack of knowledge of the authors’ background assumptions, the context or purpose of a text, the unfamiliarity of some with the subject matter, the wide gap between the time when the texts were written and modern times, and cultural differences between the people of the Bible and modern societies make the Bible difficult to understand.³³ These problems call for Biblical interpretation, so that those who read the Bible can understand and deepen their spirituality.

Reading and understanding the Bible as an African is not a new thing. T. C. Oden has pointed out that in the first century A.D., Christian leaders in North Africa had already designed a way of how best to read the law and the prophets in the way

³⁰Bennett, “Africa“, 11.

³¹Morgan, R., and J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1.

³²Ibid., 1-2.

³³Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, 4.

in which they could understand. They were able to think philosophically and to reach ecumenical decisions that led to the formulation of the Christian faith in a triune God. This was done long before these ways of reading the Bible were accepted elsewhere in Christendom.³⁴ Oden has further observed that “the rules and methods for interpreting scripture were decisively shaped not only by Africa’s greatest scientific investigator of sacred texts, Origen, but also by fourth- and fifth-century African exegetes like Didymus the Blind, Tyconius and Augustine of Hippo”.³⁵ In other words, African influence not only had an impact on Biblical interpretation but on the development of Christian dogma. Oden puts it succinctly thus:

African exegetes powerfully affected the dogmatic formulations of the orthodox of the East and the West. Dogmatic definitions were based on the textual interpretations hammered out chiefly in Africa. Their definitions of Christology and the Trinity were profoundly shaped by the definitions and concepts that were defined earlier in Africa by Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Augustine and Cyril. Western Christian dogma was formed with precision in Africa before it became ecumenically received world wide.³⁶

Reading and understanding the Bible as an African requires that African readers should be able to use their language and thought forms in order to be able to discern the fundamental secrets of the Word of God in the Bible. They must identify with the Biblical text before it can be explained to them and applied to their life concerns and aspirations. This view is fairly old in the history of Biblical interpretation in Africa. Oden has postulated that in the past there was a “close engagement of early Christian teaching with indigenous, traditional and primitive African religions in North Africa ... throughout the first millennium . Inland African cultures ... were the main testing ground for early Christian dialectical models of the relation of Christianity to culture”.³⁷ It is important to point out that reading and understanding the Bible from an African perspective entails a holistic approach to Scripture. This is in line with the African world-view which is holistic in the sense that no clear distinction is made between the secular and the profane, the physical and the spiritual. The spiritual world is constantly impinging on the physical world, and the two worlds form a complete whole. Ngindu Mushete has intimated that reading the Bible from an African perspective involves taking note of African culture, religion and civilization. “It advocates the right of African Christians to ponder Christianity and its truth in their own terms”.³⁸ Luke N. Mbefo has pointed out that “just as grace builds on nature so also revealed Christian religion should build on the natural religion of Africans, which until the advent of

³⁴Oden, *How Africa shaped the Christian mind* 29-30.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 45.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 46-47.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 58.

³⁸Ngindu Mushete, “The history of theology in Africa: From polemics to critical irenics” in *African theology en route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi & Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979, 27.

Christianity had been the sole vehicle of the transcendent".³⁹ In the same vein, Oden has noted that "many African Christians today have a deep conviction that they must think in terms that are indigenously African because this is what has been most neglected".⁴⁰

Kwame Bediako has observed that failure to use African thought forms and religious traditions has, to some extent, hampered the way people understand the Bible and consequently, missionary work itself. He has noted, for example, that the use of the vernacular in Biblical translation and study assisted his students to understand the Biblical texts and added a depth of meaning in their grasp of the gospel message. He refers particularly to Heb. 1:3, where in the Twi language the verb *dwiraa* is used in the translation. The study occurred at the time when people were observing the traditional New Year festival called *Odwira*, which, because it marks the end of one year and the start of a new year is above all a festival of purification, reconciliation and renewal. As people began to analyse the *Odwira* festival itself and its key ideas, it occurred to them that *Odwira* had something to do with Jesus, and that the atoning work of Jesus could be related to the traditional *Odwira* rituals and its anticipated benefits.⁴¹ By extension, this seemed to be equivalent to Paul's declaration in 1 Cor. 10:4, according to which the rock that gave the Israelites water in the wilderness was Christ himself.⁴² In this case, the traditional festival of *Odwira* became the means of gaining a further insight into traditional culture, while the meaning of the Scripture was also illuminated in a new way.⁴³

Bediako laments the fact that churches in Africa, which have built a profound connection with African society and their vernacular heritage, appear to have been less effective in meeting the spiritual and psychological needs of their members. For most Africans, the traditional world-view continues as a potent element in their understanding of reality. This is a result of the failure of churches to use their vernacular heritage, as in the *Odwira* festival example above, to build a continuing dialogue with their local cultures.⁴⁴ Bediako has observed further that the Christian tradition, as historically received through the missionary enterprise, has on the whole been unable to sympathise with or relate to the spiritual realities of the traditional world-view.⁴⁵ What is even more discouraging is the fact that resistance has also been registered among some fundamentalist African scholars as a result of their being taught in their churches to bitterly oppose and denounce their own African heritage as Satanic.⁴⁶ This is basically neo-colonialism at its worst and should not be tolerated.

³⁹Luke N. Mbefo, *Towards a mature African Christianity* (Enugu: Spiritan Publications, 1989), 24.

⁴⁰Oden, *How Africa shaped the Christian mind*, 93.

⁴¹Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 71.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁶Oden, *How Africa shaped the Christian mind*, 97.

There is a general feeling among African scholars that, regrettably, for centuries, missionaries prevented African converts from reading and interpreting the Bible using African thought forms and African world-views. There was fear in the missionary field that this would lead to syncretism. Such fear has done a great disservice to the Africans. As Simon E. Smith in Jean-Marc Ela has observed, "Africans have been robbed of their culture and thus even their human identity by a history of colonialism and exploitation which is not yet fully over."⁴⁷ Jean-Marc Ela has deplored the fact that Christianity has, throughout its history in Africa, practised a "deculturizing" control over African populations, forcing them to sever their roots and lose their authenticity".⁴⁸ According to Ela, it is high time that the Church must understand the world in which the African lives, if the Church wants to move beyond Christianity as it is today—"a religion alive only inside churches and a religion usually confined to books, while the majority of the faithful can neither read nor write".⁴⁹ It appears to me that reading and understanding the Bible from an African perspective today is necessary in order to enable the Christian message to be relevant to the African people. Mbiti has pointed out that the gospel that reached Africa during the period of evangelisation was wrapped up with many layers of cultures, histories, theologies and traditions. Such layers have, of course, blurred the real kernel of the gospel message. At present, Africans are living on borrowed or inherited Christianity. It is now incumbent upon the African people to develop a form of Christianity with genuine roots in the African soil.⁵⁰

The call to come up with a Christianity which is relevant to the African people has come from different quarters. Mbefo has observed that in 1969, Pope Paul VI issued a challenge to African bishops: "You may and you must have an African Christianity".⁵¹ Again, Mbefo has noted that the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions has, from time to time, urged African bishops to find ways and means of adapting African Traditional Religions to Catholicism. The aim of such adaptation has been that "the Church will be more and more at home in Africa, and Africans will be more and more at home in the Church."⁵² Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula, at the 1974 Roman Synod, is reported to have said: "in the past foreign missionaries Christianised Africa. Today the Christians of Africa are invited to Africanise Christianity."⁵³ Bishop P. K. Sarpong from Kumasi, Ghana, is also reported to have made a similar statement: "Christianity should be Africanised, not Africa Christianised".⁵⁴ Similar calls have

⁴⁷Jean-Marc Ela, *My faith as an African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988), ix.

⁴⁸Ela, *My faith as an African*, xiii

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 34

⁵⁰Mbiti, *Bible and theology*, 7

⁵¹Mbefo, *Towards a mature African Christianity*, 4-5.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 5.

⁵³Isichei, E., *A history of Christianity in Africa* (London: Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1995), 1

⁵⁴M. Ott, *African theology in images*, 21.

been made by many different Christian denominations in Africa, particularly from African Independent Churches.

Biblical Interpretation In African Independent Churches

The African Independent Churches have taken the daring step of promoting reading and understanding the Bible as an African. In their bid to make Christianity relevant to the African people in all aspects of their lives, these churches are making use of the African peoples' religious cultural heritage to explain many of the doctrines of the Church. Consequently, they have produced and are producing a ritual-oriented church, which appeals to the deep-seated emotions of the African people and thus satisfies their spiritual hunger. In this context, African Independent Churches have become, as it were, catch points, which attract thousands of people into the fold of Christ.

Space does not allow us to examine each and every Biblical text or image that has been understood from an African perspective in the African Independent Churches. We shall, therefore, limit ourselves here to a few relevant examples. In the first instance, African Independent Churches have taken the initiative of interpreting the Bible to improve their understanding of the nature and work of Jesus Christ. By and large, the Christology of the African Independent Churches expresses the African peoples' concern for healing, freedom from diseases, liberation from witchcraft, pain and suffering, droughts and famine, and fear of death. The identity of Christ is, therefore, cast in an African mantle by choosing Christological titles in the Bible that agree with the African world-view. As a corollary, some of the most appealing and most powerful titles of Christ have to do with the saving, protecting and healing power of Christ. One of these is the image of Christ as mediator or intermediary. This at once brings to mind Christ's role as intercessor, protector and go-between for God and His people on earth; a position occupied, in African Traditional Religion, by the ancestors. The view of Christ as an ancestor is readily appealing to the African people; Christ can be considered as an Ancestor per excellence as described in Hebrews 7:25 and Timothy 2:5.

On the basis of his healing miracles, as described in numerous New Testament passages, Christ is best understood when presented to Africans in the garments of a healer or diviner. Where the traditional healer fails, Jesus the Christ excels. Jesus may also effectively be presented as a prophet, because like prophets and diviners in traditional societies, who can see secrets and can predict the future, Jesus knew what was in peoples' hearts (Mk 2: 8) and offered prophecies, such as the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Mk. 13:2). Similarly, the titles of Saviour and Redeemer are very appealing to the people, in view of the fact that they are faced with a barrage of social and ecological problems. These problems include diseases of many kinds, the unpredictability of the weather, the existence and fear of witches and the existence and fear of evil spirits. In traditional settings, salvation or redemption from these powers of evil is achieved, to a certain extent, through the activities of diviners, traditional healers and rainmakers. In view of their failure to conquer all human ills, African Independent Churches have formulated a Christology in which members of their churches meet face to face with Christ the Liberator or Saviour (LK. 4:18); (Gal. 5:1).

In the same vein, when it comes to the Holy Spirit as presented in the Bible, African Independent Churches use African thought forms to understand the nature and work of the third person of the Holy Trinity. Spirits, as perceived in African Traditional Religions, are very similar to the ancestral spirits. The line of demarcation is so thin that it is sometimes difficult to determine where the belief in ancestors end and the belief in the Holy Spirit begins. In this context, by using African thought forms, there is also a sense of self-identification between the African people and the Holy Spirit in the Bible. The Holy Spirit is considered the healing agent, acting through human prophets, healers, bishops, individual Christians or the whole congregation in the Church. Like Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is a Healer. He helps the healers and prophets in their work, and provides the healing power. The Holy Spirit is also considered an agent of divination, in the sense that he gives the healers, prophets, bishops and pastors wisdom and knowledge to diagnose diseases. Through the Holy Spirit, they know the causes of diseases when patients come for healing; it helps them to prescribe the most effective medicine for the disease.⁵⁵

The view that Africans understand the Biblical texts and images better when employing African thought forms in Biblical studies is supported by research carried out by M. L. Daneel among African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe. During Bible study lessons with members of the African Independent Churches, Daneel observed that there were close similarities between certain passages in the Bible and some African beliefs and practices. Daneel describes his experiences as follows:

Particularly striking was the agreement between the African world-view and that of the Old Testament ... Perhaps of even greater importance than the role of polygamy and fertility in the Old Testament, was that it apparently supported some form of *ancestor cult* ... The fact that Paul calls "honour your father and your mother" "the first commandment with a promise" appears to substantiate this view, particularly when we recall that the specific promise "that your days may be long" links up closely with traditional African spirituality.⁵⁶

Daneel observed with great interest that in the Bible study lessons mentioned above, female respondents paid particular attention to and had a better understanding of topics such as the creation story. He concluded that the female respondents' marked preoccupation with God the Creator derived, to a large extent, from the heavy demands made on women in African society to procreate. He also noted that the women's conception of God's spirit as the preserver of the primordial mass of water is reminiscent of the traditional High-God's predominant role as the provider of Africa's quest for fresh water in times of drought.⁵⁷ This connection between the creative activities of God and the procreation activities of human beings gave members of these churches a greater understanding of the nature and work of God.

⁵⁵J. N. Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana: The Case of African Independent Churches* (Gweru: Mambo Press), 89-217.

⁵⁶M. L. Daneel, *Quest for belonging: introduction to a study of African independent churches* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1987), 85.

⁵⁷M. L. Daneel, *Fambidzano: Ecumenical movement of Zimbabwean Independent Churches* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1989), 314-315.

Daneel also noted that the Bible, in the vernacular, reminded Africans of their own colonial experience. The history of the suffering and liberation of the Israelites, as described in the book of Exodus 3-15, showed fascinating links with the African experience. He noted that Independent Churches showed a decided fascination and identification with the liberation history of the Israelites. According to Daneel, “the very nature of the rise of Independentism, its general awareness of “liberation” from the white dominated mission church structures and the emergence of prominent IC leaders, who were perceived as Moses figures opposing an oppressive white administration, made the Israelite liberation history a dominant theme in IC religious life from its inception.”⁵⁸

This picture was very strong in African countries such as Zimbabwe where Africans were forced to fight for their independence. In such countries, there was a close identification between the plight of the Israelites and what people suffered or went through during colonial oppression. Here, the exploitation of the Israelites by the Egyptians was equated with the exploitation of the Africans by the whites. Again, the Egyptians’ fear of the threat of the Israelites to their land was equated with the fear of the whites to the threat of the blacks whom they thought wanted to take the white peoples’ land.⁵⁹ Those who fought for their independence in Africa were deeply touched by the story of the Israelite suffering and delivery in Egypt, for it was the same as the suffering that they experienced during their own struggle for independence.⁶⁰ Liberation theology, whose foundations were firmly entrenched in the Israelite experience, became a catalyst for socio-political change.

Another area with a parallel between African thought and the Biblical text is in the genealogy of Christ and that of the African people. This seems to have endorsed their world-view and their understanding of Christ as truly human. From an African perspective, the genealogical account of Jesus and his mother in the New Testament gave African Independent Churches a deeper understanding of Christ’s connectedness with humanity. Christ the Son of God was truly human. He was born into one of the tribes of the Jewish people according to God’s wish and he grew up among them, so that they could understand his ways. Only in this way could they follow him, because he was a member of the tribe.⁶¹ Through this observation, Daneel concluded that from an African perspective, the Africans are readily able to identify themselves with Christ on the basis of genealogy. Placed in the African context with its great emphasis on lineage, kinship and tribal affiliation—Christ was indeed a real human being with concrete human connections. The incarnation of the Son of God was not a vague or abstract phenomenon. It was real in every respect of being in the African sense.⁶²

⁵⁸Ibid., 315.

⁵⁹Ibid., 316.

⁶⁰Ibid., 317.

⁶¹Daneel, *Fambidzano*, 330-1

⁶²Ibid., 331.

Reading And Understanding The Bible As An African In Mission Churches

Though it would be fallacious to assume that attempts to read and understand the Bible as an African have only been made in the African Independent Churches, it should be admitted that such efforts have been negligible in the mainline churches. It appears that from the beginning of the missionary era in Africa in the 19th century, Christian missionaries adopted F. D. Schleiermacher's method of Biblical interpretation, according to which there are three stages of Biblical interpretation: understanding, exposition and application. This means the first stage of Biblical interpretation is to understand the original meaning of the text as it was in the mind of the author (exegesis). Once this has been done, the second stage is to expound or explain the text for the benefit of others, paraphrasing it in one's own categories of thought (hermeneutics). The third stage is application, in which the text is related to the concerns and interests of modern readers.⁶³

This method of Biblical interpretation does not start with the process of self-identification with the text in the first stage. While in Schleiermacher's view the order of Biblical interpretation should be (1) understanding, (2) exposition and then (3) application, the African perspective requires the first stage be self-identification with the text before it can be properly expounded and applied. The assumption is that before a Biblical text can be properly interpreted, understood and applied, it must be appropriated by the reader. There must a process of self-identification with the text.

The call to contextualise the Bible in mission churches has come from individual missionaries, theologians, church leaders as well as certain ecumenical institutions such as the All Africa Conference of Churches, World Council of Churches and a number of National Christian Councils in many countries in Africa. Among church leaders and theologians the names of William Colenso, Vincent Lukas, A. Shorter, V. Donovan, K. Dickson, K. Bediako, John Mbiti, L. Sanneh, John Pobee, Charles Nyamiti and R. Wynne stand out. Different denominations such as Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and others have also made efforts to contextualise Christianity in Africa. Much of this, however, has been in the area of liturgy rather than Biblical studies. Great efforts have been made to Africanise church music, symbols, sacramental practices such as marriage, naming of children, the Lord's Supper, images and statues. All in all, efforts that have been initiated in the mainline churches to indigenise the Bible, are nowhere nearer what has taken place in the African Independent Churches. At best it can only be described as cosmetic. Having said this, however, we shall give here a few examples of some of the missionaries who attempted to express Biblical teaching in African thought forms.

Bishop William John Colenso (1814-1883) of Natal, South Africa, during his ministry among the Nguni in Natal, noted that the Zulu, like the Hebrews in the Old Testament times, practised plural marriages. Colenso believed in the full humanity of the Zulu, and his position was to use their culture as the vehicle of the Christian

⁶³ John Barton, "Biblical criticism and interpretation 1: Old Testament" in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Thought*, ed. A. E. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 35-41.

gospel. J. A. Draper has pointed out that Colenso discovered that the Zulu had a strong belief in a supreme God, *uNkulunkulu*, and a highly developed ethical system based on the conscience, *unembeza*.⁶⁴

Colenso's continued dialogue with Zulu culture in his ministry as bishop led him to reject the idea that those who had not heard or accepted the gospel were damned to eternal hell-fire. To him, this doctrine was inconsistent with his perception of a just and loving God of Jesus Christ as described in the Bible. He strongly opposed the idea that converts in polygamous marriages should simply put away all their wives except one. He felt this would cause enormous social dislocation and suffering for the other women and their children.⁶⁵ Colenso believed that African Traditional Religions should not be coarsely and violently rooted out, since they contained many seeds of true religion. He insisted that the South African Church should be African and not partly westernised.⁶⁶ Colenso was strongly convinced that certain aspects of Nguni life were compatible with Biblical narratives, and that the Nguni could be brought to Christ in the context of Nguni beliefs and practices. His efforts were strongly opposed by the Anglican hierarchy, and he was eventually excommunicated in 1886 under the charge of heresy.

Another example to contextualise the Bible in Africa was attempted by Vincent Lukas (1926-1944), the Anglican Bishop of Masasi in what was then Tanganyika. Vincent Lukas noticed that like the Hebrew people in the Bible, the Africans in the Masasi region practised the initiation ceremony of circumcision, locally known as *jando* for boys and *malango* for girls. He decided to use *jando* and *malango* as means of interpreting the Biblical message of baptism. Vincent Lukas was clever enough to see a striking parallel between the concept of death and resurrection, as taught in the initiation ceremony of baptism as found in Roman 6: 3-6, and the concept of death and rebirth in the initiation ceremony of circumcision, during which the novices put to death their old self and emerged on the other side as a new creation. He decided to provide a Christian rite of *jando*, which, while retaining what was good in the African traditional rite of circumcision, should eliminate what was evil and yet be accepted as fulfilling the essential conditions of *jando*. This dialogue was successful and contributed greatly to the growth of the church in the area, to the extent that the White Fathers in the Roman Catholic Church also introduced a similar initiation ceremony in their area of influence.⁶⁷

Another attempt to Africanise Biblical teaching was undertaken by Canon Ronald Wynne, an Anglican priest, who worked among the Hambukushu at Etsha in Ngamiland, Botswana from 1970 to 1982. During his missionary enterprise, Wynne studied the

⁶⁴J. A. Draper, "Bishop John William Colenso and History as Unfolding Narrative," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 117 (December 2003): 100.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 100-101.

⁶⁶W. Saayman, *Christian Mission in South Africa: Political and Ecumenical* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1991), 46-7.

⁶⁷A. G. Blood, *The History of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa*, Vol. 2 (London: U.M.C.A., 1957), 154-6.

culture of the Hambukushu carefully and critically and made it the entry point of his mission. He was convinced that in order to be successful, his missionary work should arise out of the character of the people themselves in relation to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Wynne based his instructions on the peoples' customs and way of life, linking them with the Old Testament. He told the Hambukushu that, just like the Israelites, who suffered greatly in the hands of the Egyptians as recorded in Ex. 1-2 and who were liberated by God as recorded in Ex. 3-15, the Hambukushu were freed by God from their oppression under Portuguese colonial rule and given rest in their new found land-Botswana.

Wynne also drew a parallel between the nature and work of Christ as described in the Bible and the Hambukushu's ancestor cult. He began by acknowledging the Hambukushu's strong belief in ancestors and their direct impact in the daily life of the people. Without condemning the ancestors, Wynne developed his Christology on what the Hambukushu already knew concerning their intermediary and intercessory role in society. Basing his Christological reflections on Romans 8:29, Wynne presented Christ to the Hambukushu as an "Elder Brother", the "First Born" among many brethren who died, rose and ascended to Heaven and through whom we have access to the Father. He taught the Hambukushu that Christ, like an earthly ancestor, lived our kind of life. He was tempted as we are, yet without sinning. More than that Christ made a new covenant-relationship through his blood, thereby showing that God is not far away from human beings but completely involved in their common life.

Similarly, Wynne constructed an ecclesiology based on the Hambukushu social system of one big extended family. In such a system, children do not have just one mother or father; every adult of the biological parents' age in the village is treated as alternate parents. If a child's own parents do not look after them properly, any other "father" and "mother" will take them in. Wynne presented the Church as an extended family encompassing the living, the living-dead, and the unborn, reaching beyond the confines of the tribe to cover the whole world.

In order to enable the Hambukushu to grasp the theological meaning of baptism as described in the Bible (Mt. 28:18-20; Rom. 6:1-11), Wynne drew a parallel between Hambukushu initiation ceremonies for girls and baptism as practised in the Church. He pointed out that just as initiation ceremonies are required for a girl to enter into the community of adults, baptism is a Christian ritual required to enter into the family of God—the Church.

To explain the Lord's Supper as described in the Bible (Mt. 26:26; 1 Cor. 11: 23-26), Wynne drew on the Hambukushu's religious meal at harvest time and their ceremonial meals after communing with the ancestors. Using as a reference the Hambukushu traditional religious meals, which enhance solidarity among the living, the living-dead and the unborn, Wynne turned the Hambukushu's attention to the Lord's

Supper which is a sacrament of unity of God's people in the Church.⁶⁸ As things turned out, Wynne's method of Biblical interpretation appealed to many people. The church that was formed around his teaching has so far stood the test of time.

Conclusion

In this chapter, it has been argued that there is a need to interpret the Bible from an African perspective. When the Bible was introduced in Africa, it was presented in European thought forms and languages, and its interpretation was based on European culture. This hampered the development of Christianity in Africa; but after the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, and efforts to interpret it in the context of African culture, the African people may now read and understand the Bible in their own terms. This has accelerated the expansion of Christianity in Africa.

⁶⁸J. N. Amanze, "From Nyambi to Christ: Rev. Ronald C. Wynne's missionary strategy among the Hambukushu of Etsha in Ngamiland-Botswana 1970-1982" *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa*, No.117 (2003), 59-65.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Introduction to Christian Theology: Its Tasks and Methods

James N. Amanze

Introduction

Theology is as important, challenging and interesting as any other academic subject. If taken seriously, it can be very enriching, exciting and useful. This chapter introduces students to the study of Christian Theology as an academic discipline, and attempts to answer some of the common questions about theology and its use in society. The chapter begins by defining Christian Theology and then examines the evolution of Christian theology from the apostolic period to the present. Thereafter it discusses the characteristics and tasks of theology, a definition of and sources for “doing theology,” theological methods, major branches of theology and the use of theology today.

Christian Theology Defined

The word theology comes from two Greek words: *theos* (God) and *logos* (“word”, “discourse” and “doctrine”¹). Heinrich Fries, in *Fundamental Theology*, points out that theology, as a concept, can be traced back to Plato’s writings. From a Platonic perspective, theology is a reflection on the myths, the legends and history of the gods, purified of everything scandalous, judged philosophically and critically, demythologized and interpreted according to the criteria of political education.² Thus theology represented to Plato the path from myth to logos. The function of logos was to uncover the truth hidden by the gods in mythology and myths. Theology was thus a form of revelation. Today, theology consists of talking about God and theologians are proclaimers of God. Theology is religious talk about the gods. One of the classical definitions of theology, attributed to St. Anselm of Canterbury, defines theology as

¹H.C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 1.

²H. Fries, *Fundamental Theology* (Washington: The Catholic University Press, 1996), 130-131.

“faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*).³ John Macquarrie, in *Principles of Christian Theology*, defines theology as “the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.”⁴

There are as many theologies in the world as there are world religions. John Parratt, in *A Guide to Doing Theology*, has made a distinction between what he calls oral theology and academic theology. According to Parratt, all Christian believers “do theology” in one way or another. For example, when one is engaged in worship, prayer, reflection on the scriptures, informal conversation about the Christian faith with each other, fighting for social justice, advancing the welfare of other human beings and the like, one is doing what Parratt calls “oral theology”, in most cases unwritten and practical.⁵ This type of theology can also be called “popular theology” because it is generally used in the context of a particular religion. In this context, it can be argued that every Christian is a theologian in his or her own right. Parratt observes that oral theology constitutes an important ground-work for the more structured, critical, and sophisticated theology work done by academics in the context of their own experience. Academic theology is based on critical thinking about the tenets of one’s faith, and seeks to explain the meaning of that faith in a well-argued way.⁶ R.P.C. Hanson has weighed in by stating that “theology is the science of thinking about God”.⁷ Christian theology is generally understood as a systematic reflection upon the meaning of Christianity.⁸ Geoffrey Wainwright notes:

In modern usage ... theology characteristically means the reflective enterprise that both feeds and intends to serve those primary manifestations and deliverances of Christian faith that occur as revelation, narration, proclamation and worship. Reflective theology seeks to understand, clarify and explain the faith. As an activity of individual thinking believers, it usually takes guidance from dogma or official doctrine of the faith community to which the theologian belongs.⁹

Pantelis Kalaitzidis points out that theology, as the prophetic voice of the Church’s self-understanding, seeks to express a charismatic experience and a transcendent

³D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 2; A. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, ed. A. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 45.

⁴J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 1.

⁵J. Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology* (London: SPCK, 1996), 8.

⁶*Ibid.*, 8

⁷R. P. C. Hanson, “Introduction to the Pelican Guide to Modern Theology” in *Systematic and Philosophical Theology* (W. Nicholls, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 7.

⁸J. Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 1.

⁹G. Wainwright, “Method in Theology” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. A. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 369.

reality over and beyond words, concepts or names. It seeks a dialogue and communication with the historical present in every age, adopting the language, the flesh and the thought-world of each particular era—of the historical and cultural present at any given time.¹⁰

Richard A. Muller, in the *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, has observed that the scholastics, generally, defined theology as *sermo vel ratio de Deo*—a word or rational discourse concerning God—and therefore as human wisdom or knowledge about God. According to Muller, theology as a system or academic discipline is a science or wisdom constructed for the clarification and defense of faith.¹¹

The Two Broad Divisions of Christian Theology: Natural vs. Revealed Theology

Generally speaking, theologians make a distinction between two types of theologies namely, natural theology (*theologia naturalis*) and revealed theology (*theologia revelata*). Natural theology is based on natural religion (sometimes known as the Book of Nature), in which people understand God through rationally observing nature.¹² Floyd H. Barackman has pointed out that what is revealed about God in nature is known as general revelation. According to Barackman:

general divine revelation is that communication that God makes continuously to all people by his works. This kind of revelation points to the existence of God and the creaturehood of man. Because of this revelation the world is without excuse for its failure to acknowledge the true God, to seek him and to render him basic honours and service.¹³

Parratt notes that the term “natural theology” is quite often used to designate the knowledge of God as Creator. Such knowledge is available to all human beings. It is considered as the starting point from which we learn that God is a Redeemer through the Gospel. There are certain passages in the Bible (Psalms 8; Acts 17:21; Rom. 1:18 ff), which support the view that human beings can know God through the natural world.¹⁴

Revealed theology, on the other hand, is based on divine revelation as contained in the Bible. It notes that in the course of human history God revealed or manifested

¹⁰P. Kalaitzidis, “The theological agenda of Volos Academy between the ‘return to the Fathers’ and modern Orthodox theology” (Paper presented at the WOCATI-ETE/WCC International Congress, Volos Academy for Theological studies, June 5, 2008).

¹¹Ibid., 298.

¹²Ibid., 298.

¹³F. H. Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 43-44.

¹⁴Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 5.

himself to the people of Israel, as recorded both in the Old and New Testaments.¹⁵ Divine revelation in scripture represents the truths that are necessary to salvation, but which cannot be discovered through unaided human reason.¹⁶ This knowledge is called “special revelation,” and Barackman defines it as follows: “that action by which God makes himself known to people by some communication with them through personal manifestation and works. This completes general revelation by providing additional information about God and the universe, by making known God’s will for mankind and by revealing salvation through the Lord Jesus.”¹⁷

Subdivisions of Revealed Christian Theology

Revealed Christian theology is a very wide discipline, encompassing a number of types or branches. This section elaborates on four broad categories or genres, within which fit other specific types of theology.

First, there is *exegetical theology*. This branch of theology is based on biblical interpretation and is mainly concerned with the study of scripture. It includes introduction to the study of the Bible, biblical languages, higher criticism, textual criticism, reduction criticism, biblical archaeology, biblical hermeneutics, and biblical theology. Biblical theology is the scientific exposition of the theology of the Bible.¹⁸ It studies systematically and in detail the truths revealed in the canonical writings of the Old and New Testaments, which are acknowledged by the Church as the primary witness to the work and word of God.¹⁹

Next, there is *systematic theology*, derived from exegetical and historical theology. This branch of theology consists of an orderly and harmonious presentation of divine truths with a view to unity and completeness. Reason may supply certain elements in such presentation.²⁰ Nicholls has noted that systematic theology is the discipline in which the basic points of theology are set forth in the clearest way possible.²¹ Informed by and interacting with the other theological disciplines, its particular task is to venture a faithful, coherent, timely and responsible articulation of Christian faith. This is a critical and creative activity, requiring both courage and humility. Systematic theology challenges practitioners to interpret the doctrines and practices of the Church in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.²² It arranges biblical teachings and explanations in logical order, under specific headings such as Trinity, Christology, Pneumatology,

¹⁵Ibid., 5.

¹⁶R. A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 298.

¹⁷F. H. Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology*, 44.

¹⁸E. Y. Mullins, “Religion and Theology,” in *The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. M. J. Erickson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 30.

¹⁹D.L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 14.
10. See also Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology*, 14.

²⁰Mullins, “Religion and Theology,” 30.

²¹W. Nicholls, *Systematic and Philosophical Theology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 22.

²²Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 11.

Soteriology and others. This division also includes Christian apologetics, polemics and ethics.²³

A third type is *historical theology*. This theology traces the origin, development, and spread of Christianity together with its doctrines, institutions and practices. It covers biblical history, church history, the history of missions, the history of doctrine and the history of creeds and confessions.²⁴

Last, there is *practical theology*, which involves applying knowledge from the other branches of theology to assist with salvation, sanctification, edification and ministry. This division includes homiletics, church organisation and administration, worship, Christian education, spirituality, pastoral counselling, caring for the poor, visiting the sick, the dying and the bereaved, stewardship and the work of missions.²⁵ Also known as applied theology, this, according to Nicholls, is the theology which allows the notions of systematic theology to be applied to the life of the Church and in particular to the work of the ministry. Practical theology belongs largely to the professional training of future ministers and it interacts with education, medicine and psychiatry.²⁶

The Debate Concerning the Scientific Nature of Christian Theology

There is a heated debate concerning the status of Christian Theology as a science. Some scholars argue that theology is a practical science because it leads believers to God. Others argue that theology is not properly a science; that science is characterized by demonstrative certainty, while theology is based on divine authority accepted in faith. Theology ought, therefore, to be classified as a form of wisdom, not as a science. Thomas Aquinas is reported to have once said "Theology is taught by God, teaches of God, and leads to God."²⁷ Resolving this debate must begin by defining the term *science*. Michael Jenkins, in *Invitation to Theology*, draws our attention to the definition of science as "a study of physical phenomena by means of controlled experiments, the findings of which must be verified independently by others who repeat the same methods and test the results of the previous experiments".²⁸

Under this definition, theology does not appear to qualify as a science: the subject matter of theology is God, and the existence of God cannot be demonstrated according to laboratory methods.²⁹ It has been noted above that "theology is belief seeking understanding," which means that it cannot be duplicated in scientific laboratories.³⁰ Jenkins argues that one of the factors in questioning the scientific nature of theology is that "the word science has been placed in a methodological straightjacket by many of

²³Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology*, 15.

²⁴Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology*, 14-15.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 15; Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 10-11.

²⁶Nicholls, *Systematic and Philosophical Theology*, 23.

²⁷R. A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 299.

²⁸M. Jenkins, *Invitation to Theology* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 49.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*

its modern practitioners, a straightjacket that has proven too constrictive even for some of the best physical scientists of our time”.³¹ Jinkins observes that in the popular mind, science and theology are often thought of as mutually exclusive; so the claim that theology is a science seems far-fetched.

But theology *is* a science, in that it is a critical and analytical attempt to study a subject: an attempt carried out with methods appropriate to its subject matter (God).³² Theology is a careful, disciplined, critical and analytical study of the relationship between God and his creations. Theology is a quest or search for understanding the meaning of ultimate reality.³³

John Stacey, in *Groundwork of Theology*, notes that theology is “words about God”. Theology is “thinking and speaking about a god”. This speaking and thinking about a god is the science of theology.³⁴ Stacey writes:

In so far as there are similarities in method between theology and the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, zoology and the rest)—the use of imagination and critical reason, taking a risk and working on the assumption that a hypothesis is true—it may be useful to call theology a science ... but because theology must deal with the supernatural as well as the natural it is plausibly better not to press this particular claim. The queen of the sciences must find another throne to sit on.³⁵

Wolffhart Pannenberg, in *Theology and Philosophy of Science*, points out that the claim that theology is a science can be traced back to the 13th century. According to Pannenberg, the word *theology* came into common use as a comprehensive description for the investigation and presentation of Christian teaching.³⁶

The challenge on whether it is appropriate to consider theology as a science in the strict sense of the word is based primarily on its subject matter. For example, natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology and others deal with raw material, which is concrete and observable. These subjects can be studied empirically. Their raw materials are concrete, and one can observe them with one’s physical senses. Furthermore, they can be subjected to further observation in the laboratory in order to increase our knowledge about them on the basis of which scientists can base their findings and conclusions. Other scholars can repeat the same experiments and confirm the results, establishing general laws anywhere in the world. This does not necessarily apply to theology, whose subject matter, by its very nature, cannot be observed or experimented on in a laboratory. This problem is further compounded by the fact that not everyone believes in God and therefore not everyone can be convinced that

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 50

³³M. Jinkins, *Invitation to Theology* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 50-51.

³⁴J. Stacey, *Groundwork of Theology* (London: Epworth Press, 1984), 23-24.

³⁵Ibid., 24.

³⁶W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the philosophy of science* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 7.

theologians talk about something that is real which can be comprehended by our five senses.

Parratt observes that theology is somewhat different from natural sciences. It is more of a speculative science and akin to other subjects such as philosophy. Theology requires a personal commitment over and above what one would expect of any scholar in any discipline. One of its requirements is that the person engaged in theological reflection should accept the idea that there is a supra-empirical world out there which cannot be grasped by our physical senses.³⁷

The question of how far theology is a science is presupposed in the question of the relation of theology to universities in general and the set of sciences taught at the university. This, according to Pannenberg, is why the subject came into prominence only in the thirteenth century. It was at this point in time that universities deemed theology to be a science. Pannenberg intimates that this development came in part from the desire in Christian thought to prove its truth by generally acceptable criteria.³⁸ In regard to this issue, Heinrich Fries has noted that:

Science is qualified knowledge. It is knowledge that is methodically laid out and gives an account of how it was arrived at. Theology is the *scientia fidei* (science of faith), *fides in statu scientiae* (faith in the state of science)...The object of the science of faith, of theology, can thus be nothing other than faith and the reality that is disclosed in faith and in faith understanding—in other words, God and God's revelation.³⁹

J. A. Lamprecht notes that "theology can be scientific ... in the sense that it claims a special realm of knowledge through God's action and attestation of Himself, and because in its exposition it follows a method and recognises limits dictated by this object of knowledge which is also its norm".⁴⁰ Edgar Y. Mullins says that theology is the systematic and scientific explanation of God's self-revelation. Sometimes the term is used in a narrower sense, meaning the doctrine of God as distinguished from the doctrine of man, sin, salvation or other particular doctrine. But it has also come to mean the whole range of doctrines regarding God in his relation to man.⁴¹ Mullins indicates that theology is a critical discipline. Although the traditional definitions often describe theology as a science, this does not mean that its content is subject to independent critical judgement. The content is widely regarded as given once and for all in ancient revelation.⁴²

³⁷J. Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 1-2.

³⁸Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 14.

³⁹H. Fries, *Fundamental Theology*, 130.

⁴⁰J. A. Lamprecht, *Theology Here and Now: Or, A Theology of Acceptance* (Fort Hare: Fort Hare University Press, 1973), 5.

⁴¹E. Y. Mullins, "Religion and Theology," in *The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. M. J. Erickson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 30.

⁴²E. Y. Mullins, "Religion and Theology," in *The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology*, 40.

Gareth Jones points out that theology, as an academic discipline, is a very complicated affair: “God is always, in some sense, other than this world and its inhabitants. This means that students of theology ... not only do they live in a world which manifests many ingenious ways of speaking of what it believes to be the divine, additionally, that divinity, God, can nowhere be seen and identified as God”.⁴³ According to Jones, Christian theology concerns the belief that God is present in the world and has acted within history in Jesus of Nazareth, as revelation of God’s will to be with the world and ultimately to save it and its inhabitants.⁴⁴ Jones argues that because of the many difficulties confronting the student of theology, “theology will always be an inexact science; it will always involve the student in a process of argument and counter-argument, statement and counter-statement, application and withdrawal”.⁴⁵ Theology seeks to understand the Christian faith on the basis that it is true. This truth, however, is not something that can be demonstrated empirically. Christian truth is based on the conviction that God is present in the world, as was revealed in Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

Robert C. Neville notes that though the principal topic of theology is God, other matters related to the divine warrant theological investigation. These include the world, society, problems of human life and more. Both individuals and their society as a whole are to be analyzed theologically as they require understanding of their relationship to the divine. This can also be said of history, institutions and cultures, as well as religious institutions such as churches, musical and liturgical traditions and the traditions of theology itself.⁴⁷

Who Qualifies To Do Christian Theology?

Robin Gill observes that theology is typically understood as a scholarly activity, undertaken by people of faith for others within that faith and within a context of communal religious practice. This view, however, is no longer tenable in a pluralistic society—in which it cannot be assumed that all those studying or teaching academic theology share the same faith—because the relationship between faith and religious practice in such instances becomes far more ambiguous.⁴⁸ Gareth Jones indicates that the theologian is also “outside” faith in the sense that he or she must stand back somewhat in order to reflect upon their faith. This does not involve absolute separation but is distinct enough to define the theologian as holding a discrete place in the believing community. Using the analogy of the prophets in Judaism, Jones notes that the

⁴³Gareth Jones, *Christian Theology: A Brief Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 3.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁷R. C. Neville, *A Theology Primer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1-2.

⁴⁸R. Gill, “The Practice of Faith,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. G. Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 2-3.

theologian's task is to address what they see happening in their world. In this context the theologian is both "in" and "out" of the boundaries of faith. The theologian stands always in the edge of things, on the borderlines of faith and society.⁴⁹

The Task of Christian Theology and Theologians

According to Millard J. Erickson, the task of Christian theology is to state, in some intelligible and orderly fashion, the doctrines of Christianity. The precise tactics and objectives of theology will vary from one period to another and among theologians at a given time. Because theology does not function in a vacuum, it is important that the mood of a particular time be understood when constructing a theology.⁵⁰ Other tasks of theology, as stated by Wainwright, are to enrich both faith and doctrine, and to criticize particular instances of faith and doctrine in the name of a more authentic faith and doctrine.⁵¹ James Woodward points out that theology can lead to social transformation: "the attempt to understand and respond to contemporary human issues from a theological perspective is likely to affect people's views of themselves and the world ... This represents a kind of transformation or change".⁵² It can also enhance different ways of thinking about and understanding phenomena or situations. These may be expressed in the form of written or spoken words such books, articles or speeches. It may also assist people to change their attitudes and beliefs. For example, an effective practical theology of poverty may result in people thinking differently and in a more sophisticated way about this topic. At the same time, new ways of behaving and acting in response to poverty may be identified and implemented.⁵³ The task of theology and theologians has been described this way by William Nicholls:

Theology is the literature in which the faith of Christians finds intellectual expression. A theological writer expresses the faith he shares with the Christian community in the intellectual terms available to him in his time, and so helps himself and his fellow believers to understand what they believe, so far as that is possible.⁵⁴

Daniel L. Migliore, in *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, indicates that theology has many tasks. First, to provide a clear and comprehensive description of Christian doctrine. Secondly, to translate the Christian faith in terms that are intelligible to the wider culture. Thirdly, thinking about important issues from the perspective of Christian faith. Fourthly, to reflect on the practice of

⁴⁹Jones, *Christian Theology*, 24.

⁵⁰M. J. Erickson, *The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. M.J. Erickson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 15.

⁵¹G. Wainwright, "Method in Theology," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. A. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 369.

⁵²J. Woodward, *Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. J. Woodward & S. Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 9.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁴Nicholls, *Systematic and Philosophical Theology*, 17.

Christian faith within an oppressed community.⁵⁵ According to Migliore, theology arises from the freedom and responsibility of the Christian community to inquire about its faith in God. The work of theology is a continuing search for the fullness of the truth of God made known in Jesus Christ. "Theology is not a mere repetition of traditional doctrines but a persistent search for the truth to which they point and which they only partially and brokenly express".⁵⁶ As a continuing inquiry, the spirit of theology is interrogative rather than doctrinaire; it presupposes a readiness to question and to be questioned.⁵⁷

Migliore points out that one of the common elements in the conviction of theologians both past and present is that the Christian faith prompts inquiry, searches for deeper understanding and dares to raise questions. Theology calls for students to ask whether or not one rightly knows who God is and what God wills.⁵⁸ Faith in God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, sets an inquiry in motion, fights complacency, and continually calls in question unexamined assumptions about God, our world and ourselves. Migliore is of the view that the Christian faith has nothing in common with indifference to the search for truth, fear of it, or the arrogant claim to possess it fully. True faith must be distinguished from fideism—the claim that there comes a point where we must stop asking questions and must simply believe. Faith keeps on seeking and asking.⁵⁹

Migliore maintains that "theology grows out of this dynamism of Christian faith that incites reflection, inquiry and pursuit of the truth not yet possessed, or only partially possesses."⁶⁰ He postulates that Christian faith prompts inquiry because, though Christians affirm that God has decisively spoken in Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-2), there is much they do not understand.⁶¹ Inquiry also arises from the fact that we live in a changing world. Christians, like all people, live in particular historical contexts with their own distinctive problems and possibilities. The ever changing, ambiguous, and often precarious world poses ever new questions for faith, and many answers that sufficed yesterday no longer work today. New situations and crises such as sickness, guilt, injustice, epidemics, personal or social calamities and death affect Christians like anyone else. Christians are not immune to these situations.⁶² The Christian faith asks questions and seeks understanding, both because God is always greater than our ideas of God, and because the public world that faith inhabits confronts believers with challenges and contradictions that cannot be ignored.⁶³

⁵⁵D.L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 1.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹D.L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 4.

⁶³*Ibid.*

Characteristics of Christian Theology

As an academic discipline, Christian theology has a number of peculiar characteristics. In the first instance, theology is participatory: a theologian participates in the religious faith which he or she is explaining. A theologian can never remain neutral. As Stacey points out, theology is not content merely to describe a religion: it makes the claim that the religion it is studying is in fact true. The theologian, whether a professional scholar or a lay person doing his or her theology in the working world, is a committed person to a particular religion. He or she participates in the religious faith being studied.⁶⁴

Theology demands critical thinking. Theologians must be reasonable, thoughtful and consistent. Ideas need to be reflected upon, considered from different angles and perspectives in order to arrive at a considered understanding of their meaning and significance. They need to be skilled in asking relevant questions.⁶⁵ Theology is a discipline of the mind. The contents of religion—symbols, sacred places, rituals, sacred books and more—must all be subjected to the inquiring, reflecting mind, thus producing theology.⁶⁶

Generally speaking, theology is expressive: it must express the content of the faith the theologian is studying in the clearest and most coherent language available. It involves the use of a rational language that can be understood by people prepared to make the efforts to understand it.⁶⁷ One of the most important things a theologian must do is to develop a theological language that people can understand. Most disciplines have their special vocabularies: physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology, sociology and so on. This technical language allows practitioners to communicate their ideas in a compact and systematic way. Theological language enables theologians to say in a precise way what would otherwise require a lengthy explanation. There are certain technical words, such as Christology, soteriology, eschatology, hamartiology, pneumatology and others that a theologian needs to be familiar with, since they have become a kind of a shorthand.⁶⁸

Theological language is, to some extent, different from the language of other sciences, which is problematic. Because of its concern with the supra-empirical world, theology does not use language in its normal, literary sense. In order to express the invisible or supra-empirical reality in using human language, it uses figures of speech, metaphors, symbols and poetry.⁶⁹ As Anthony C. Thiselton has noted, “language which otherwise signifies objects, events or states of affairs in the physical world has to be stretched ... to signify realities which lie beyond the empirical world.”⁷⁰

⁶⁴J. Stacey, *Groundwork of Theology*, 24.

⁶⁵G. Jones, *Christian Theology: A Brief Introduction*, 35-36.

⁶⁶J. Stacey, *Groundwork of Theology*, 24-26.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸J. Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 13.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰A. C. Thiselton, “Religious Language,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. A. E. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 315.

Another characteristic of theology is pluralism: there are different ways of speaking of God, and therefore, of seeking to understand faith. Though faith may be singular, theology is pluralistic, because it recognizes that the different circumstances in which people speak about God will naturally lead to different statements. This leads to what is known as contextual theology. Contextual theologies relate their talk about God to the specific circumstances of the society in which people live.⁷¹ With this in mind, Parratt writes: "A valid expression of the Christian faith for our world demands that there should be a multiplicity of theologies ... Genuine theology is always situational and contextual, it meets us in our own particular situation and springs from the context in which we find ourselves."⁷²

Theology is limited: each and every one who theologizes comes into the discipline with certain parameters and limits set by the context or situation. Being limited, therefore, is a result of being pluralistic to suit particular social, cultural, political and economic world which governs what the theologian can do and say. Jones points out that this being the case, a theology cannot simply be tested against the perceived authority of the church or the Bible. Rather, it must be tested against the situation which it seeks to address. According to Jones, limiting theology to specific circumstances helps make theology relevant. A good theology turns theoretical discussions to bear on the practical circumstances which it must address.⁷³

Theology is also practical: it is focused upon and directed towards a specific context and the people who live within that context. Application is one of the distinctive qualities of theology.

Theology is dynamic: it moves from theory to practice, from looking to doing.⁷⁴ Theology is constructive: it goes beyond the requirements of being reasonable, thoughtful and consistent. It is also provocative, engaging and demanding. Theology must be constructive when turning debate and discussion towards the quest for solutions, for it is solutions, or goals, which theology ultimately seeks to articulate. Being constructive means addressing the tasks and responsibilities of theology, particularly its contextual application, by directing the individual and the community towards recognizably Christian goals.⁷⁵

Finally, theology is imaginative and visionary: it looks beyond what can be seen here and now. It works by suggestion, by using images, linguistic or otherwise, to convey an understanding of something which is taken to be inexpressible. Essentially, it is the theological imagination which one must rely upon to communicate something of the mystery of God's reality. Imagination involves thinking beyond one's material world. Imagination enables the theologian to articulate thoughts and feelings about the divine.⁷⁶

⁷¹G. Jones, *Christian Theology: A Brief Introduction*, 29-30.

⁷²Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 20.

⁷³G. Jones, *Christian Theology: A Brief Introduction*, 32.

⁷⁴G. Jones, *Christian Theology: A Brief Introduction*, 33.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 39-40.

The Theological Method

Every academic discipline has its own method—mode of accomplishing an end or task—for conducting a particular study and arriving at certain conclusions. This is also the case with theology. Wainwright observes that in Christian theology there is a great deal of diversity over the question of methodology, style and substance. Theological methods normally depend on the nature and character of the theology in question.⁷⁷

Quest For Contextualization

John Parratt points out that theology is always done in context: within a specific historical, social, political, religious and cultural context. There is no such a thing as a final theology, because theological discourse is an ongoing process. Theology is always in the making, always adapting and being adapted to new and ever changing circumstances. Therefore, it is important for theologians to continually re-think and re-experience their faith in terms of their own context. This helps to make theology relevant to the needs of the people in concrete, existential circumstances.⁷⁸ Theologians must express the truth of the Christian message in the language, thought forms and symbols of their own culture. This approach recognizes the fact that “the core or kernel of the Gospel has never existed, and can never exist, in abstract outside of particular and specific context ... there is never a naked body of the Gospel which does not wear the clothes of one or other culture”.⁷⁹

Migliore points out that in doing theology, one important factor in choosing the method used is social location. The concrete situation of a theology shapes the questions that are raised and the priorities that are set (e.g. religious pluralism, African culture, etc.). In each setting, different aims and criteria come into play. Each social location of theology imposes its own set of questions, its own relative criteria of truth and adequacy and its own special emphasis. Examples of social location include academic context, the church, the wider society and so on.⁸⁰ Jones puts it this way:

Theology begins not in general questions, but in a consideration of particular circumstances, their constituents, and what they have to say about the way in which those living in them are related to God. Theology is always qualified by a context and an adjective, be it social, political, historical or anything else.⁸¹

Theology does not exist in a vacuum. Talk of God is constantly informed by realities of the world and society in which people live and work. Though students of theology may themselves not share the beliefs of the theologian or community with whom they are studying, they have the responsibility to relate their ideas to the contemporary

⁷⁷G. Wainwright, “Method in Theology,” 369.

⁷⁸J. Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 17-19.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁰D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 16

⁸¹G. Jones, *Christian Theology: A Brief Introduction*, 22.

situation. Studying theology is always relational, drawing the student into the craft of interpretation. Theology is always considered an applied science, that is, applied to the world in which theologians live.⁸²

The Christocentric Approach : The Primacy of Scripture

There are several different theological methods. One of the most influential theological methods is associated with Karl Barth, who placed a great deal of emphasis on the Bible; more specifically, on Christ as the Word of God incarnate. Karl Barth's theological method has come to be known as Christocentric. It involves the idea that the Church must continuously test itself and its proclamation by its own norm, which is Jesus Christ as attested in scripture. In this context, theology becomes a process of subjecting the Church to questioning and testing by reference to the living Word of God in Jesus Christ. Theology's primary questions are those that the Word of God addresses to us here and now, rather than the questions arising out of our experience or situations. Barth's theological method underscores the priority of the Word of God and the unsettling questions that it continuously raises, most especially to the Church regarding the faithfulness of its proclamation and life.⁸³ In this context the Bible becomes the starting point for theology. Everything else must be measured against what the Bible says.

The Correlation Approach

The second method of theological inquiry is associated with Paul Tillich, and is known as the correlation method. Existential questions of human life are formulated by an analysis of the human situation in a given period as seen in its philosophy, literature, art, science, and social institutions. These questions are then correlated (brought into relation or correspondence) with the answers of the Christian message as found in the Bible. The aim is to create genuine conversation or dialogue between human culture and the biblical message, rather than creating a division or separation between them. This method does not surrender the normativeness of the biblical message to general culture and human experience. The biblical message is not normalised by a given situation, but must speak to it in order to make sense. This can happen only if theology attends to the actual questions raised within a particular situation. Correlation involves mutual correction and enrichment of the partners in the conversation: in this particular case, the biblical message and the existential issues being analyzed. Those who use this theological method argue that only in this way is it possible to open theology to the important contribution of culture and to approach culture with genuine concern for the intelligibility and credibility of the truth claims of faith.⁸⁴

⁸²Ibid., 25.

⁸³D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 16-17.

⁸⁴Ibid., 17.

The Praxis Approach

Another theological method, *praxis*, is associated with Latin American Liberation Theology. Praxis is a technical term designating a way of acquiring knowledge that binds together action, suffering and reflection. The praxis method is also associated with African, Black, Feminist and other Third World theologies. In Latin America, Gustavo Gutierrez defined liberation theology as a “critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the world”. Real commitment to and struggle for justice comes first. It is out of real struggle for human freedom and justice in the world that the pertinent questions of theology are raised. A new way of reading and interpreting scriptures results when concrete praxis is taken as the point of departure for critical theological reflection. The first step is real charity, action and commitment for the sake of others. Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology follows as the second step. Theology, and the questions it pursues, must arise from a practice of solidarity with the poor and with their struggle for justice and freedom.⁸⁵

The Phenomenological Approach

In addition to the above three theological methods, the phenomenological approach is considered one of the best ways of acquiring theological knowledge. According to Macquarrie, the phenomenological method comprises careful analytical description of that which shows itself (the phenomenon) by removing as far as possible concealments, distortions, and whatever else might prevent us from seeing the phenomenon as it actually gives itself. Macquarrie intimates that this methodological approach has three advantages: (1) it begins at the right place, with the phenomena themselves, (b) it assists clarity, and (c) it proceeds by description rather than by deduction, thus moves upon a more secure ground. In any deductive argument there is, at every step, the possibility of falling into a logical fallacy.⁸⁶ Phenomenological description aims for a degree of care and precision which would seem to lay a firm foundation for any study. The phenomenological approach brings into the light the conditions that have to be satisfied in order to prove assertions on a matter to be true.⁸⁷ In this approach, empirical methods—such as surveys and questionnaires—may be used to establish the nature of contemporary beliefs and behaviour, or the nature of a particular human need.⁸⁸

Sources For Doing Theology

In any scientific investigation, the investigators deal with raw material which they use in order to acquire knowledge of what they are investigating. This also applies to theology, the raw materials of which are scripture, history of dogma, reason, Church traditions, human experience, culture, philosophy and other sources.

⁸⁵D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 17-18.

⁸⁶J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 35-36.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 36.

⁸⁸J. Woodward, *Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 9.

Scripture

Theologians generally agree that the Bible is the foundation document of Christianity. It is an authoritative piece of literature. It is the basis of Christian belief, church practice and Christian spirituality. In using the Bible as a source for theological inquiry, there are a number of principles that need to be followed. In the first instance, there is a need to identify the literary category of the biblical text being used. The Bible is not a single book but a compendium or library of different literary types which include myth, saga, legend, history, parable, prophecy, allegory, poetry, apocalyptic and so on. Each category of a biblical text conveys different meanings: a parable cannot be interpreted in the same way as a piece of history or poetry. Other factors to consider include the cultural and historical background of the biblical text being used, the aims of the author, the time of writing, the social, cultural, economic, political, and historical background, the place of writing and the intended audience. This will help the theologian determine the original meaning of the biblical text or passage to the original speakers or writers and hearers or readers. This is called exegesis: bringing out the meaning of the text in its original context. Exegesis is followed by hermeneutics: the interpretation of the biblical text for the present time and situation.⁸⁹

Neville observes that hermeneutics aims to connect the interpreter and the original text. This process recognizes that the cultural world in which a Biblical text was written was different from our own not only in terms of language but the whole social matrix. The “hermeneutical circle”, which connects ancient and modern understanding, moves back and forth between the text as we possess it in our own time and the text in its own original cultural context. The more that people understand about the ancient world, the more they can interpret the original meaning of the text. This process alerts the interpreters to their own presuppositions, which are different from those of the text’s original world. With a new consciousness of their own angle of vision, the interpreters can go back again to the original context with new insight, which in turn reveals more about themselves and the world around them.⁹⁰ In this particular process, Neville has identified four main elements: (1) the text or scripture to be interpreted, (2) the historical tradition connecting the text to the interpreter, (3) the experience of the interpreter and the world of the text and (4) the process of reasoning about how these fit together.⁹¹ Other scholars have read and interpreted the Bible from an ideological perspective, such as in Latin American Liberation theology, African Christian Theology, Black Theology and Feminist Theology.⁹²

History of Dogma and Church Traditions

Another very important source for theological inquiry is the history of dogma. McGrath notes that dogma is doctrines which are defined as essential to Christian faith by

⁸⁹J. Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 25-26.

⁹⁰R. C. Neville, *A Theology Primer*, 15.

⁹¹R. C. Neville, *A Theology Primer*, 15.

⁹²J. Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 27.

universal assent. They are the non-negotiable elements of the Christian faith. According to McGrath, there are only two dogmas: the Christological and Trinitarian, as defined by the ecumenical councils in the early Church.⁹³ Theologians generally agree that the first five hundred years of the Christian era are of great importance for doing theology. This was the period when many important developments took place in the life of the Church. For example, it is during this time that the canon of the Bible (a list or a compilation of books accepted as the basic standard or criterion of Christian faith, life, and theology), was decided upon. In Protestant churches, the canon of scripture is composed of 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament. In the Roman Catholic Church, other writings found in the Greek Septuagint but not in the Hebrew Bible are also included in the Old Testament canon.⁹⁴ The processes that led to the formation of the canon of the Bible should be of great interest to theologians, since they provide some information on how the individual books were selected to form one book as we have it today. It was during the first five hundred years of the history of dogma that formal statements of the Christian faith were made: these came in the form of ecumenical councils. The most important of these are the Council of Nicea (325), the Council of Constantinople (381), the Council of Ephesus (481) and the Council of Chalcedon (451), whose decisions are accepted by both Roman Catholics and Protestants.

During the Patristic period (c100-451 AD) statements of faith such as the doctrine of the Trinity, Christology, Pneumatology, Hamartiology, Anthropology, Soteriology, Grace, and others were made. Modern theologians, therefore, must use these statements of faith or doctrines when they are engaged in a theological inquiry. These statements constitute the raw material for theologizing. But in doing so, theologians must provide new interpretation in order to meet the spiritual needs of their age and culture.

Related to the history of dogma are the different religious movements such as Gnosticism, Montanism, Arianism, Donatism and others that took place during the Patristic period. There were also different schools of thought, among which were the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools. Many such religious movements and schools of thought were a reaction to controversial doctrinal statements, events, developments, or philosophical assertions in the church. Some of the religious movements, such as Montanism (a charismatic movement), have a direct connection with developments in the modern Church and so it is worthy studying them.⁹⁵

Apart from scripture, the church fathers also wrote some books which are very useful in theological reflection such as the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Herms*. These books were highly regarded by the early Christians.⁹⁶ Since Christian theologians

⁹³A. McGrath, "Doctrine and dogma," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. A. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 113.

⁹⁴D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 405.

⁹⁵Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 40-41.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 36-37.

work in a given church tradition—for example, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal and African Independent Churches—there is a need to take into account the documents that have been produced by such ecclesiastical entities. For instance, Roman Catholics regard the Council of Trent, the documents of the Second Vatican Council and Papal decrees as authoritative. Other church traditions have their own specific documents that give identity to their own theologies. Apart from the documents produced by the four ecumenical councils, Lutherans also use the Augsburg Confession (1530); Anglicans use the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church; and the Reformed Churches use the Westminster Confession of the Reformed Churches (1642).

Closely related to the development of doctrine in the Church is the development of Christian tradition. Edward J. Yarnold defines tradition as “the process by which the revelation made by Jesus Christ is passed on and interpreted from age to age.”⁹⁷ In concrete terms, tradition refers to beliefs and practices which are handed down from one generation to another.⁹⁸ Parratt observes that theology must take into account the way in which Christians throughout the centuries have known, experienced and responded to God.

Early Christianity developed the church liturgies, structures, practices and spirituality which are the raw material for theological inquiry today. Macquarrie notes that the importance of tradition is found in the fact that it not only gave birth to, proclaimed and interpreted scripture, but also in its remembrance of Jesus in the sacraments of the church, especially the Lord’s Supper. From the outset the Eucharist was based not on scripture but entirely on tradition.⁹⁹

Reason

Human beings are rational beings: they are able to think and make decisions based on reason. Anthony Grayling notes that “reason is the faculty of mind by which evidence is weighed, inferences are drawn, truth and falsity are judged, and explanations are sought and given”.¹⁰⁰ The exercise of reason is called rationality, and any means of arriving at judgments or beliefs which do not use reason, such as those which are purely emotionally based, are considered non-rational or irrational, involving judgments deliberately contrary to reason.¹⁰¹ Theology as an intellectual discipline uses reason. Christians believe that God is a rational being at the highest degree and that he has endowed human beings, whom he has created in his image and likeness, with the capacity to think and make judgements based on sound reason. Since theology is

⁹⁷E. J. Yarnold, “Tradition” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. A. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 643.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 644.

⁹⁹J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 11.

¹⁰⁰*The New Penguin English Dictionary* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 1164-5.

¹⁰¹*The New Penguin English Dictionary* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 1164-5.

“faith seeking understanding”, reason plays a very important role in achieving an understanding of God.

There are differences of opinion concerning the role of reason in theology and the extent to which it can be used. One group of theologians claims that reason is an ally of revelation and that revelation must be informed by reason. This view is dominant in Catholic Theology, Anglican Theology, and much of Protestant Theology. Another group holds the view that reason has a minor role to play in theology; in some extreme cases it is rejected altogether and denounced as an enemy of revelation. Macquarrie observes that branding reason as an enemy of revelation is tantamount to declaring that theology is not an intellectual discipline.¹⁰² Emmanuel Kant, in defense of using reason in theologizing, is reported to have said: “were biblical theology to determine, wherever possible, to have nothing to do with reason in things religious, we can easily foresee on which side would be the loss; for religions, which rashly declare war on reason, will not be able to hold out in the long run against it”.¹⁰³

Neville observes that neither tradition nor scripture can be interpreted without using reason. Reason is a most conspicuous source for theology, in which it brings to bear considerations that otherwise would be ignored.¹⁰⁴ Parratt points out that theologians normally use raw material such as general revelation, scripture and church history; in order to make these raw materials coherent, they have to examine, sift and evaluate their relative importance with all the critical resources at their disposal. All these are activities of human reason. Theologians try to make statements of faith reasonable to people. Theology is an academic discipline which seeks to communicate itself and to be understood; the job of theologians is to present a reasonable account of the Christian faith. Theologians understand that God has endowed His people with reason. To ignore this fact would render Christianity abnormal and irrelevant. The significance of reason in theological reflection, lies in how it enables theologians to relate revelation to the world in which they live, taking into account the possible objections from other sciences.¹⁰⁵

Macquarrie observes that reason can broadly be divided into two categories: speculative (or imaginative) reason and critical reason. Speculative reason endeavours to construct a theory of reality based either on pure reason alone or on experience. On the other hand, critical reason is characterized by critical thinking: sifting, analyzing, expounding and bringing into the light the content of revelation. Critical reason questions or interrogates the credentials of revelation, submitting it to scrutiny and criticism, removing from its content whatever may be in irreconcilable conflict with other well-informed convictions that may be held. Although the different types of reasoning have found their way into theological discourse, critical reason is highly recommended as one of the essential factors in theological inquiry.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰²Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 15.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴R. C. Neville, *A Theology Primer*, 16.

¹⁰⁵J. Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 7.

¹⁰⁶J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 15-17.

Human Experience

Another important source for doing theology is human experience. An experience is an event that one goes through by direct participation or observation, and through which one acquires knowledge and skill. Such conscious events make up an individual life, a community or a nation as a whole.¹⁰⁷ According to Macquarrie, theology implies participation in a religious faith. Theology is normally preceded and motivated by some experience of the life of faith. Theology provides a clear explanation of the content of faith—the experience that people go through. Scholars generally agree that there are many varieties of human experience. Theology tries to make sense of our religious experiences. The experience of a life of faith comes from participation in a community of faith. The form this experience takes varies from individual to individual and from one particular community to another.

Religious experience can be dramatic and emotional or quiet and contemplative. It can take the form of a moral struggle, intellectual quest, mystical awareness or esthetic sensibility. Macquarrie indicates that theology must be rooted in religious experience. Failure to do this will lead to doing theology in abstract: that is, without anything concrete. Theology must keep the view of the experience of the whole community of faith. It must draw from the whole range of human experience—political, economic, cultural, social, psychological, esthetic, spiritual and religious. This assumes that there are recognizable signals of transcendence within empirically given situations: that phenomena belonging to ordinary everyday awareness may point to something beyond the immediate situation. Macquarrie has observed that in the broadest sense, it is the experience of existing as a human being that constitutes a primary source for theology. It is not just explicitly religious experience that matters, but all experience in which a religious dimension is discernible that is the source for theological inquiry. This is particularly so in a secular age when people disclaim an explicitly religious experience.¹⁰⁸

Neville intimates that experience is an important source for theology and for criticising scripture, tradition and reason, because it provides the ground for relevance for theological assertions. Experience helps theologians to determine in what aspects theological assertions need interpretation; e.g., some experiences, such as the need for order in a religious community, the cultivation of individual spiritual life, the prophetic critique of society in the name of divine justice or the experience of women, poor people and minority groups, are important in theological assertions.¹⁰⁹ Neville points out that when theological movements based on scripture, tradition, reason and old experience fail to address the particular experiences of individuals, experience becomes the critique of scripture, tradition and reason.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷*The New Penguin English Dictionary*, 488.

¹⁰⁸J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 6.

¹⁰⁹R. C. Neville, *A Theology Primer*, 16.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*

Human Culture

John Macquarrie notes that if theology is to be intelligible, it has to use the language of the culture within which it is undertaken. He also notes that no one can escape sharing in the mentality or intellectual climate of his own culture. Words that are used to express our faith have connotations which imply a whole cultural background. In doing theology, a theologian must be careful to take culture into account. Since theology is cast in the cultural milieu of a given group of people, it must be re-interpreted when it meets another cultural context. The eternal message of the Bible was originally given in the context of cultures which are very different from our own: first Jewish, then Greek, Roman, British, French and other European cultures. In order to make sense of this message, there is a need to formulate it in the cultural language and thought-forms that people can understand today. The same applies to the doctrines and creeds of the Church.¹¹¹ Parratt, in agreement with Macquarrie, has also noted that there is a need to express our understanding of God and the world in the language and thought-forms of the cultural tradition in which we have been nurtured. Failure to express Christian theology in the language of individual cultures has made Christianity appear foreign and Jesus Christ an alien figure. In order to avoid this state of affairs, there is a need to express Christian theology in terms that each society can relate to and to clothe it with indigenous cultural forms. This means translating the original message in the Bible into the language and symbolism of the receiving culture.¹¹²

Philosophy, Western and African

Theology uses philosophy in order to explain some aspects of the Christian faith. The Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary has defined philosophy as “the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge” and the philosopher as “a lover of wisdom”.¹¹³ The role of philosophy, especially Greek philosophy, became obvious once Christianity came into contact with the Hellenistic world. The dominance of philosophy in the history of Christian thought goes back to the early Church. Various Greek philosophies dominated the thinking of both the early and later Fathers of the Church. Christian theologians borrowed terms from Greek philosophy, such as *Kurios* (Lord), *Logos* (word, reason), *homoousios* (of the same substance), *prosopon* (personification), *hypostasis* (basic essence) and many others. Greek philosophies such as Platonism, Neoplatonism, Stoicism and Aristotelianism have been used from time to time as tools for doing theology. In the contemporary world, existentialism and Marxism have been used to explain certain Christian theological concepts. This has led philosophy to be considered the handmaid of theology. Obviously, philosophy is a necessary tool for theological reflection as a rational academic subject.

¹¹¹Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 13-14.

¹¹²J. Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 51.

¹¹³A. M. Macdonald, *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1972), 1002.

In Africa, attempts to express theology by using African philosophical thought is traced back to 1945. According to Parratt, Placide Tempels, a Belgian priest who worked in the then Congo (now DRC) before independence, published a book titled *Bantu Philosophy*¹¹⁴ in which he argued that African cosmological thought was systematic and coherent. He contended that the Bantu world-view was dominated by the idea of life-force and that the universe was perceived as a hierarchy of beings which shared to differing degrees in this life-force. At the top of this hierarchical power was God himself and below him were ancestors, chiefs and other human beings who, with the rest of God's animate and inanimate creations, participated in this life-force to varying degrees. Although Tempels' ideas did not escape criticism, they inspired a new crop of theologians who articulated their theology using the same concepts of life-force, and a hierarchically structured cosmology.¹¹⁵

The Use of Theology in Human Life

Although theology is considered to be in the realm of sacred knowledge, it has not escaped criticism from certain quarters. For example, it has been pointed out that what we need is not more theology but simple faith; not more elegant arguments but transformed hearts; unadorned commitment to Christ, unqualified acceptance of what the Bible teaches and uncompromising trust in the Holy Spirit.¹¹⁶ It has also been argued that most theology is a mere intellectual game that leads to paralysis rather than action: that Christians should stop all this barren theorizing and get on with doing something. It is argued further that faith is a matter of transformation—personal, social and world transformation; that faith is being willing to put your life on the line for the sake of Christ and the Gospel.¹¹⁷ In addition to this, it has been claimed that theology is not only speculative and impractical but that it often assumes a quite sinister and despicable form of giving religious justification to the rule of the powerful and to conditions of injustice. Theology is accused of serving the interests of the powerful at the expense of the powerless and the poor.¹¹⁸

Despite the above criticisms, theology is useful in many ways. It serves the Church by offering both guidance and criticism. Theological reflection plays an important role in the life of the Church, because the Church must be self-critical: it must be willing to examine its proclamation and practices to determine their faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ which is the basis of the Church's life and mission.¹¹⁹

Theology also helps people to obtain knowledge of the truth in divine matters or matters pertaining to God insofar as that can be determined. It provides guidance to

¹¹⁴This book was published by Presence Africaine in Paris in 1959.

¹¹⁵J. Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 82.

¹¹⁶D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 8.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹⁸D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 8.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 10.

people on how to live a life acceptable to God. Theology provides a critique of beliefs in religion. In addition to this, it helps people to understand religious identity: either of their own group or that of others. As Neville has put it, “theology is the intellectual part of coming to terms with identity, putting off identity, taking it on, and reacting to it”.¹²⁰ Theology is the cognitive approach to identity.

Theology, in addition, opens many job opportunities. People with theological/philosophical knowledge are employed in many sectors of society. They work as ministers and teachers in theological, primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. Theologians work in church-related organizations such as Christian Councils. They work as chaplains in armies, police forces, prisons, hospitals, and universities; with displaced people and the destitute. Theologians can be found in positions of leadership as administrators, politicians and business people. Studying theology can also equip people to work as journalists, radio broadcasters, TV programmers and presenters. Many other job opportunities exist: social and marriage counseling, working with nurses and doctors, with youth and women organisations, labour relations, in non-government organizations, the legal system, and also in the area of pastoral counseling, especially in this era of HIV and AIDS.

The Emergence of Third World Theologies

One of the most dramatic developments in theology in the 20th century has been the emergence of Third World Theologies—sometimes called *theologies in the developing world*—mainly in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Theologians from these continents seem to have one thing in common—a dire need to develop relevant theologies for their cultural, political, economic and religious situations. In Africa, the most well known Third World Theologies are Latin American Liberation Theology, African Christian Theology, Black Theology and Feminist Theology, all of which are discussed in this book. We shall here examine some of the basic ideas of these theologies and see how they are different in method and content.

Latin American Liberation Theology is specifically rooted in the dire poverty and political oppression of many Latin American people. This theology emphasizes the following points: preferential love for the poor, salvation as holistic liberation and theology as an element in the practice (praxis) of liberation rather than a mere theory. It is grounded on “base Christian communities”, that is, on local gathering of lay Christians for worship, Bible study and strategic planning for social action. Emphasis is on “praxis” or action.¹²¹ This theology places a great deal of emphasis on the liberation of the poor and oppressed in all areas of life, material as well as spiritual. In this theology, the focus is on the importance of social and economic factors in doing theology and an analysis of society based on the thinking of Karl Marx.¹²²

¹²⁰R. C. Neville, *A Theology Primer*, 18.

¹²¹D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 415.

¹²²Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 44.

African Christian Theology developed in Africa in the 1960s as a reaction against the attitude of cultural superiority displayed by missionaries and colonial administrators who considered African culture as inferior and demonic. It satisfied a need to assert African dignity and identity. This theology emphasizes that all cultures are created by God and that African cultures are God-given, equal to other world cultures. In the same way that God allowed His Son to be born into a Jewish culture, He also allowed Jesus to be incarnated in the cultures of African people, whom He has made in his image and likeness. The Word became flesh so that it may dwell in every culture.

Black Theology, which originated in North America in the early 1960s, found its way into South Africa in the 1970s. In South Africa, Black theology stressed the dignity of the black people in a situation in which Africans were marginalized and oppressed by a ruling white minority.¹²³ Like in North America where it originated, Black Theology in South Africa interpreted the Biblical witness and historic Christian doctrine within the context of the Black people's experiences, characterized by rampant racism, intense colonial oppression, economic exploitation, dehumanization and social injustice. This theology developed in the context of a struggle for freedom and social justice in the middle of untold suffering.¹²⁴

Feminist Theology provides a critique of the attitudes and practices of male domination in both Church and society (patriarchy). In Feminist Theology, women's experiences are considered as an indispensable theological source. It rejects the exclusively male images and metaphors of God in liturgy and theology, advocating instead the recovery of the long forgotten or suppressed contribution of women in biblical literature and Church history. It insists that women and men are equal, and that they should be valued and treated equally in all walks of life.¹²⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has introduced the student to the study of theology as an academic subject, defined theology and given a brief outline of its development as an academic discipline. The roots of theology arguably go back to the New Testament times; it may have developed over the years until it was accepted as a scientific discipline in the universities in the 13th century. This chapter has noted the problematic nature of theology as a scientific discipline. It has discussed the various methods and sources that are used in theological inquiry, the major divisions of theology, the tasks of theology and theologians, the use of theology in society and the various types of theology, commonly known as Third World Theologies, which have emerged in the 20th century.

¹²³Parratt, *A Guide to Doing Theology*, 44

¹²⁴D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 405.

¹²⁵D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 410.

CHAPTER NINE

African Theology: A Contextual Analysis of Zimbabwe

Tabona Shoko

Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the contribution of African scholarship to African theology in Zimbabwe. It starts with a brief history of the church in Zimbabwe, describing the missionary incursion in the country. It then tracks the growth and development of African theology in pre- and post- independence contexts before capturing the contemporary contextualisation of African theology in Zimbabwe.

Missionaries in Zimbabwe

Several earlier scholars have already chronicled the history of missionaries in Zimbabwe.¹ This article will simply summarise pertinent issues relating to the development of theology in Zimbabwe. The incursion of Christianity in Africa has had a tremendous impact on the growth and development of African theology. Bhila captures the implantation of Christianity in Zimbabwe in three phases: the first phase comprises the work of early Portuguese missionaries from 1560-1759; the second starts with the advent of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1859 and, later, the arrival of the Jesuits; the third phase starts in the 1890s when several missions were established in the country.²

Negative publicity from travellers, missionaries and explorers contributed immensely to misconceptions about and distortions of understanding of both Africa and African Traditional Religions (ATRs). As a result, the whole continent of Africa was tarred by misleading terms such as primitive, savage, native, paganism, animism, dark continent, fetishism and many more. It remains an arduous task to rescue the

¹See N. M. B. Bhebe, *Christianity and Traditional Religion in Western Zimbabwe, 1853-1923* (London: Longman, 1979); and C. J. Zvogbo, *A history of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe, 1890-1939* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996). See also D. N. Beach, "Initial impact of Christianity on the Shona: The Protestants and the Southern Shona" in *Christianity South of the Zambezi, Vol. 1*, ed. J. A. Dachs (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973).

²H. Bhila, "Trade and Early Missionaries in Southern Zambezia" in *Christianity South of the Zambezi, Vol. 2*, ed. M. F. C. Bourdillon (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1977), 25.

continent from the misconceptions under which it still suffers as a result of such fallacies. It suffices to track some key trends that account for the genesis and development of African theology.

Missionaries in Zimbabwe targeted African kings as access points to their subjects in order to preach the gospel of contextualisation. The history of Christian encroachment in Zimbabwe starts with the arrival of Father Goncalo da Silveira, of the Jesuit Society, the St Francis Xavier of Mozambique. His first point of call was King *Munhumutapa Chirisamhuru Negomo Mupunzaguta* who, impressed by the portrait of the Virgin Mary, was converted and baptized, together with his household. However his conversion was short-lived as Goncalo was mysteriously killed. His death has been the subject of controversy; either it was as a result of disillusionment with Christianity or the result of tension between the Swahili and Portuguese traders.³ What is clear is that Fr. Silveira's presence threatened Muslim traders and his assault on Shona tradition and customs irked traditional elders who laid a charge against him saying that, "Silveira was a spy, a *murayi* (wizard) and a double dealer."⁴ The leadership thus instigated his execution on 6th March 1561. As a result, the first attempt to evangelise the Southern *Zambezia* failed. Jesuits and another missionary order, the Dominicans, later returned to the area but by the end of the 16th and 17th Centuries had made very little lasting impression. As Weller and Linden noted, "the policy of baptizing rulers only added a few Christian symbols to the traditional religious expressions of the people... Christian practices mixed with the customs of the local people".⁵ Notably the Jesuit experience in the Munhumutapa kingdom set precedents for missionary activities that followed when they courted African monarchs to spearhead evangelization in an attempt to "create a place for the Shona in the commonwealth of the new Israel."⁶ Verstraelen succinctly observes that the colonial occupation of 1890 fully opened the way for missionary activities in Zimbabwe.⁷

The second phase of missionaries in Zimbabwe opened with the advent of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Matabeleland in 1859. After the establishment of Inyathi, various Protestant and Catholic missionary societies set up mission stations. Championed by pioneer missionaries like John Moffat, Charles Helmore and Carnegie, missionaries' confrontation with Ndebele empires of Mzilikazi and Lobengula were quite trying. Despite their spirited efforts to evangelise, the early missionaries paid scant attention to the complex and highly organized religious cults amongst the Africans.

³H. Bhila, "Trade and Early Missionaries..." 25.

⁴S. I. G. Mudenge, *Christian Education at the Mutapa Court: A Portuguese strategy to Influence Events in the Empire of Munhumutapa* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986), 8.

⁵J. Weller and J. Linden, *Mainstream Christianity to 1980 in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 3.

⁶E. Chitando, "Rewrapping the Christian Faith Indigenously: A preliminary Study of African Theology in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (2002): 5.

⁷F. J. Verstraelen, "Patterns of Missionary and Ecumenical Relationships in Zimbabwe", *Exchange* 24 (3) (1995): 150.

Negative attitudes made them believe that “Africans had no concepts of religion.”⁸ They ascribed their slow progress in converting Africans to what they called “depraved habits” and the “low intelligence of the Africans.”⁹ Local cultures were sharply criticized by missionaries. Polygyny and the belief in ancestral spirits militated against the acceptance of Christianity by Africans.¹⁰ Apparently the LMS failed to make converts in Matabeleland under the kingship of Lobengula. During more than twenty years labour, they managed to make only twelve converts.¹¹ Such results indicate that the gospel was not contextualised for the Ndebele people, and was a gospel whose theology was pregnant with superiority complex.

Missionaries’ contemptuous attitude pervaded the missionary venture in Matabeleland. However some missionaries showed some sympathy towards African customs and medicine as exemplified by David Livingstone’s openness with a ‘rain doctor’, “I use my medicine, and you employ yours: we are both doctors, and doctors are not deceivers.”¹² However others such as Moffat were vehemently critical, “I am among a people who are living in Egyptian darkness, in beastly degradation, everything in their political economy diametrically opposed to the spirit of the Gospel of God”¹³. Clearly the missionaries regarded the Africans as culturally degraded.

The early missionary approach to Africa was that of subjugation of people living in darkness. Bhebe argues that the missionaries of the 1880s had come to the conclusion that the Ndebele people and the government had to be overthrown so as to pave the way for Christianity.¹⁴ Father Prestage wrote in his letter to Britain, “Until the Matabeles are put down by brutal force...they will never improve.”¹⁵ Such statements indicate that the missionaries wanted to colonise first, and also to overthrow the government of Lobengula, so that they would spread the gospel without any hindrance with the support of the British. This all goes to show that the theology that the early missionaries propagated was a theology of colonization rather than of salvation. Such theology was in no way contextual to the local people in Zimbabwe. As Marima argues, such theology contradicts the sixth of the Ten Commandments that reads, “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20: 13). Missionaries wanted to kill first in order to implant the gospel.¹⁶ As such, they portrayed the God of their religion as a God of violence, oppression, and colonization,

⁸H. Bhila, “Trade and Early Missionaries...”, 39.

⁹H. Bhila, “Trade and Early Missionaries...”, 39.

¹⁰C. J. Zvogbo, *A history of Christian Missions*...43.

¹¹E. Marima, “The Church and its contextualisation in Zimbabwe from 2000-2004” Unpublished M.A. Dissertation (Harare: University of Zimbabwe, 2005), 10.

¹²B. C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1976), 5.

¹³Weller and Linden, *Mainstream Christianity*..., 15

¹⁴N. M. B. Bhebe, “Missionary Activity...”, 45.

¹⁵C. J. Zvogbo, *A History of Christian Missions*..., 81.

¹⁶E. Marima, “The Church...”, 11.

and yet Jesus came to liberate the oppressed (Luke 4: 16-20; Exodus 11-14). So God is the God of Deliverance and against a theology of oppression.¹⁷

The third and relatively successful phase of missionary activity in Zimbabwe began in the 1890s. About ten missionary organizations were established in the country. Following Sykes' call for missionaries to establish mission institutions, some kind of partitioning of local land was inevitable. Most missions set up stations in the following areas: Catholics at Chishawasha; Wesleyan Methodists at Epworth; United Methodists at Old Mutare; Salvation Army in Chiweshe; Lutherans at Mnene; Seventh Day at Solusi.¹⁸ The overall missionary programme was to promote Western civilization. Mission farms were established which had regulations against traditional practices such as beer drinking, polygyny, (*kuzvarira*) betrothal, ancestral veneration, traditional dances and rain making ceremonies.¹⁹ Apparently, the church was a ruthless landlord, and anyone who did not observe these 'sacred' laws was summarily evicted from the farms. The role of the church towards the land issue has been questioned but what is clear is that the church, like its colonial counterparts, occupied the land that was the birthright of indigenous people who were relegated to barren infertile land. So Christianity was biased towards the white people at the expense of the blacks. Christian theology turned out to be an accomplice in the colonization of Africa.²⁰

However, to a certain extent missionaries showed some sympathy for the concerns of the people amongst whom they were working. Some missionaries, like David Livingstone of the LMS, a medical doctor, came to fight against the slave trade in order to promote evangelization and the gospel. He used African agents to spread the gospel using local language like proverbs, idioms, parables, tradition and experience. Christianity was not supposed to take away the African values out of the Africans,²¹ a sound theology relevant to the African society and its situation. Bishop Lamont, of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, stood against colonialism and was deported by the Ian Smith regime.

The churches in Zimbabwe played a pivotal role in the development of the country in pre- and post-independence Zimbabwe. They sought to promote Christian religion through education and hospitals. Education raised the standards of Africans. Some became teachers, pastors, nurses, politicians, and doctors. African languages were developed in order to provide an effective medium of instruction. Through education, the church workers were taught technical and practical subject, for example tailoring, blacksmith and carpentry, which helped them to make a living.²² New technology for

¹⁷E. Marima, "The Church....", 11.

¹⁸C. F. Hallencreutz, *Religion and Politics in Harare 1890-1980* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1988), 26.

¹⁹N. M. B. Bhebe, "Missionary Activity....", 46.

²⁰J. N. K. Mugambi, *African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers, 1989), 32.

²¹G. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (London: Harvard University Press, 1972), 3.

²²E. Marima, "The Church...", 18-19.

agriculture was developed and projects were instituted. On health, hospitals and clinics were established in the rural areas to cater for the African society by providing medical treatment. Zimbabweans were trained as nurses and orderlies at the mission hospitals, dispensaries and clinics.²³

Missionaries had a positive influence on the African people. As Chitando notes, it is within this context that the seeds of African theology were sown. "The persistence of ATRs, the experiencing of Christianity as a foreign religion, the de-Africanising thrust of missionary and Western education and the rhetoric of nationalism provide the background to the rise of African theology in Zimbabwe."²⁴

Roots of African Theology in Zimbabwe

As African Theology was formulated in 1956 in the document *Des pretres, noirs s'interrogent* (Some Black Priests Wonder...)²⁵ Zimbabwe's own systematic reflection on Christianity lagged behind. This may be due to a deep-rooted racial bar that denied access to education for black people. But, notably, something started to materialize in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the Catholic Association strove to make Christianity relevant to African needs. The Association pressed for the recognition of the rite of *kurova guva* (bringing back home ceremony).²⁶ African Catholics argued for the harmonization of African beliefs with traditional concepts of life after death. According to Gundani, this trend was due to the influence of militant nationalists and educated African Catholics such as teachers and unionists.²⁷ Between 1921 and 1924, Roman Catholic missionaries and creative authors engaged in debates that sought to translate the 'biblical' God into the Shona concept of God "*Mwari*."

One of Zimbabwe's foremost theologians, Canaan Banana believes the trend of events was a result of the impact of African Christian consciousness. This surfaced in the wake of racial segregation and disparities in the standard of living between blacks and white set by the colonial government. Negative attitudes by whites towards blacks precipitated the Catholics, Anglican and Methodist priesthood to respond to the need for an African spirituality. Banana identified the churches with a 'double mandate', those that serve both black and whites, as being predominantly biased against blacks. This bred tensions within the churches.²⁸

²³ E. Marima, "The Church...", 19.

²⁴ Ezra Chitando, "Rewrapping the Christian Faith Indigenously: A Preliminary Study of African Theology in Zimbabwe" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (2002), 7.

²⁵ R. Gibellin, "African Theologians Wonder...and make Some Proposals" in R. Gibellin (ed.), *Paths in African Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 6.

²⁶ P. Gundani, "The Second Vatican Council and Beyond: A Study of the Transformation Process, Power Transfer and Sharing in the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, 1965-85". Unpublished DPhil Thesis (Harare: University of Zimbabwe, 1994), 118-120.

²⁷ P. Gundani, "The Second Vatican....", 118-120.

²⁸ C. S. Banana, *The Church and struggle for Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996), 33.

A new form of African creativity emerged in the 1960s as a result of missionary education. This provided valuable insights in the encounter between Christianity and African culture.²⁹ Zimbabwe produced pioneering writers such as Solomon Mutsaers, George Kahari, Joseph Kumbirai, Lawrence Vambe, and Ndabaningi Sithole. Bourdillon has observed that Africans have learnt techniques in mission schools, developed their own styles of poetry and prose, adapting from oral forms to new written medium. African music is developing and changing but not becoming Western. Aspirations and abilities, both national and personal, have arisen from missionary education without reproducing what was learned. And even in orthodox Christianity, liturgical forms and theological writings can take on a specifically African character.³⁰ In most works one detects a feasible dialogue between Christianity and African religion and culture, a resurgence of African Christology. Chitando accurately cites Sithole, a prominent nationalist's, stance: "I take it ...Jesus has become an ancestor for everybody. In other words he is a *mudzimu* (ancestor) for everybody...I do not see anything wrong in approaching God through *mudzimu* for everybody or through the Mutezo *mudzimu*."³¹

In the same vein of new African politics, more creative authors showed the possible amalgamation between Western and African values. Kahari showed how Shona literature evolved out of missionary work but remains clearly Shona in form. Fr. Lenherr's hymnody demonstrates a convergence between Western and African musical forms. Kumbirai looked at ways in which traditional belief and ritual can be brought into Christian worship. Chavunduka showed the African's appeal to both Western and African medicines.³²

Nationalism and Wars of Liberation

The 1896-7 African rebellions against colonization under the influence of religious authorities made missionaries realize they had to change their attitudes towards the Africans. The uprising effectively demonstrated the resilience of traditional religion. According to Chitando, *Nehanda* and *Kaguvi*, the leading mediums of that period, became the spiritual forbears of African resistance to European oppression. Their execution by a 'Christian' colonial administration has been read as martyrdom and their blood as the seed of the armed revolution.³³ During the Second *Chimurenga* (1962-79) war, African nationalists such as Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe thus saw themselves influenced by the power of ancestral spirits against the Christian spirituality of the colonizers.

²⁹See Mugambi, *African Christian Theology*, 1996.

³⁰M. F. C. Bourdillon, *Christianity...*, 10.

³¹N. Sithole, *Obed Mutezo: The Mudzimu Christian Nationalist* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1970), 104.

³²M. F. C. Bourdillon, *Christianity...*, 8.

³³E. Chitando, "Rewrapping the Christian Faith...", 6.

The Emergence of African Independent Churches

The coming of Christianity brought in itself new attitudes, new relationships and new values that created a new human being. The new attitude also helped local people understand and interpret the Bible to address their needs. For instance whilst missionaries attacked polygamy, local people discovered that the Old Testament contained figures like David and Solomon who practised polygamy. This naturally created disagreements and contributed to the formation of new African Independent Churches (AICs).

AICs in Africa are those churches that were started in the 19th Century as a result of African initiative in the search for independence. They are fully or partially rooted in the Christian faith. They are founded by charismatic African leaders and open to both men and women. Reasons for their emergence are political or racial, or theological or economic dominance by mainline churches. Scholars often refer to them as Sectarian; Separatist; Heretical or Nativistic. Other terms used are Spiritual or Pentecostal; Ethiopian Movements; Zionist and Apostolic.³⁴

They started in reaction to colonization and in protest against white domination in mission churches. But they are churches because they consider themselves to be Christian, the Bible normative and their institutions to be genuine churches of Christ. There are estimated to be 7,000 AICs with 6-7 million members in Zimbabwe and other sub-Saharan African countries: Zaire, Malawi, South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana and Zambia. There are three types, Zionist, Apostolic and Ethiopian.

Zionist is one of the major movements that was formed in Zimbabwe. Bryant started Zion Apostolic Church in South Africa (1920s) but schisms developed: Bishop Samuel *Mutendi's* Zion Christian Church (1940) and numerous *Ndaza* Zionists in Zimbabwe. Similar movements appeared in Zimbabwe such as Korsten Basket makers; Johane *Masowe* Apostles; Johane *Maranke's* African Apostolic Church (*Vapostori*) (1930s); *Mai Chaza's* *Guta raJehovah* and *Mai Majeche's* *Zvikomborero* Apostolic Faith Church (1991). Office bearers include bishops, ministers, priests, evangelists, prophets, caretakers etc. Both men and women lead the schismatic movements.

Zionists are Pentecostal. They emphasise the work of the Holy Spirit manifest in speaking in tongues, prophecy and faith healing. They believe in the importance of the Kingdom of God, Mount Zion, and the Holy City, Jerusalem. They have constructed church buildings, conference facilities and schools and operate businesses. Apostolic AICs believe they are commissioned Apostles who live like Christ. They practise baptism by immersion in the Jordan (understood to mean any place of baptism especially in a river). Ethiopian churches show traits of Pan-Africanism.

African Independent Churches are called African Initiated Churches, New Religious Movements and Spirit-type churches. They emphasise the importance of spirit possession and speaking in tongues under the influence of the Holy Spirit. They practise healing and exorcise evil spirits. They draw inspiration from the Old and New

³⁴S. Hayes, "South Africa Missiological Society" Internet website, <http://www/geocities.com/Athens/Parthenon/8409/aicl.htm>, (2006), 1.

Testaments. They practise polygamy, food and dietary taboos and believe in dreams and visions. They make use of symbols, music and dance. They are syncretistic. They combine Christianity with traditional worldviews. They represent an indigenous religious movement in Africa.

The emergence of African Independent Churches from Protestant Missionary Churches is therefore an indication that the missionary theology was not contextual to the Shona people. The Shona people wanted a theology that interprets the Bible passages to address their needs, a theology that addresses the issues of polygamy, barrenness, causes of illness and deaths, and ancestral spirits. African Independent Churches became an obvious outcome. Whereas Daneel identifies poor communication as the stimulus to seek independence, Barret characterizes the movement as the result of the “failure of mission to understand the society, religion and psychology of the African and failure to actualize the Biblical concept of love.”³⁵ As missionaries failed to touch the thrust of African life in their theology, they unleashed an impoverished gospel. All this created an atmosphere conducive for an African theology relevant to African needs. We may note Chitando’s accurate observation of Parrat’s point that “several factors—not all of them theological—contributed to the call for a Christian theology with an African face.”³⁶

Historiography of African Theology in Zimbabwe

Academics have proffered various definitions of theology,³⁷ but most tend to agree on the fact that theology represents the effort to have Christianity adopt African categories. In Zimbabwe, J. W Kurewa’s definition is illuminating. He defines theology as “the study that seeks to reflect upon and express the Christian faith in African thought forms and idioms as it is experienced in African Christian communities.”³⁸ This has significantly become the point of discussion and interpretation by scholars in Christian and academic circles.

The influence of Christian theology on African scholars has been pronounced in West African theology - far ahead of Zimbabwe. Pioneering African theologians on the study of African religions on the continent are J.B. Danquah, Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Vincent Mulago and Ikenga Metuh. As Westerlund notes, most of their studies are implicitly theological. “Given that the great majority of African scholars of religion are Christians and have degrees in theology, this is not surprising. Several of them including leading scholars like Idowu, Mbiti, Mulago, have been ordained too. The

³⁵D. B. Barret, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), 156.

³⁶J. Parrat (ed.), *An Introduction to Third World Theologies* (University of Birmingham: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13.

³⁷J. Hanciles, “Celestial Church of Christ: The politics of cultural identity in a West African Prophetic-Charismatic Movement,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (1998): 75.

³⁸J. W. Z. Kurewa, “The meaning of African Theology,” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 11 (1975): 36.

Christian theology that they adhere to is a theology of continuity".³⁹ This is manifest in their use of Christianising terms like "omnipotence" and "omniscience" and interpretation of divinities, spirits and ancestors as intermediaries between God and man.

The earliest elements of African creativity in Zimbabwe are detectable in the influence of formal Christian education on the writers of creative or imaginative writings. As Kalahari observes, the first period is the history and development of the Shona orthography by Bleek (1856). The period is 'historical' and is notable for the production of school readers, Bibles, Grammars and Hymnbooks. The second period was marked by the emergence of creative works, particularly the publication of the first Shona novel *Feso* by Solomon Mutsaers (1957). Between the period 1957-1974, 36 novels were written by 25 writers. As Kalahari has observed, "The end of an era is the beginning of another, the historical ushered in the creative."⁴⁰

African theology is traceable to Roman Catholic consciousness after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Amongst its first proponents was Fr J. Lenherr's survey of hymnody that disclosed the emergence of a new church music which borrowed from both Western and African music forms.⁴¹ Fr Joseph Kumbirai, a Roman Catholic priest, discussed ways in which traditional beliefs and ritual can be brought into Christian worship. His prominent exposition was the rite of *kurova guva* (bringing back home ceremony).⁴² Alongside Kumbirai was another Catholic priest and creative writer, Fr. Ignatious Zvarevashe, who drew attention to the monotheistic and complex character of Shona religion and emphasized the intermediary role played by ancestral spirits.⁴³ The overall motive was an attempt to accord ATRs a place in the religions of humankind, and "remove ATRs from the category of 'primitive' religions."⁴⁴

Rev R. Peter Hatendi discussed the issue of Shona marriage. He criticized the missionary attitude to it. He castigated the negative attitude that results from prejudice. As Chitando notes, he pleaded for the church to acknowledge the validity of traditional marriage and to appropriate its positive value since God had prepared the Shona to accept the good news of the gospel.⁴⁵ "The conclusion is drawn" Hatendi wrote,

³⁹D. Westerlund, *African Religion in African Scholarship: A preliminary Study of the Religious and political background* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1985), 88-9.

⁴⁰G. P. Kalahari, "Missionary influences in Shona poetry", in *Christianity South of the Zambezi*, Vol. 2, ed. M. C. F. Bourdillon (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1977), 87.

⁴¹J. Lenherr, "The hymnody of the mission churches among the Shona and Ndebele", in *Christianity South of the Zambezi*, Vol. 2, ed. M. C. F. Bourdillon (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1977), 103-121.

⁴²J. C. Kumbirai, "Kurova Guva and Christianity", in *Christianity South of the Zambezi*, Vol 2, ed. M. C. F. Bourdillon (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1977), 66-67

⁴³See I. M. Zvarevashe, "Shona Religion" in *Shona Customs*, eds. C & P. Killeff (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1970).

⁴⁴E. Chitando, "Rewrapping the Christian faith...", 11.

⁴⁵E. Chitando, "Rewrapping the Christian faith...", 11.

“that the Shona have many true ideas about life which God has taught them indirectly and by intuition before the Christian missionaries came.”⁴⁶

After the call of the ‘All Africa Conference of Churches’ in Lusaka, Zambia, for a moratorium on foreign missionaries and funds, African churches resolved to evolve the church indigenously. Pius Wakatama, a Zimbabwean scholar, contributed to the debate that upheld the need for African theology; “Since African theology perceives God and his activity among men through African eyes, missionaries should leave Africans free to interact with whom they will.”⁴⁷ He attacked missionaries for condemning African tradition and culture.

Chavunduka made a significant contribution in the field of medicine. Until then the medical field had been dominated by Western scientific medicine; Chavunduka found a new combination of European and African elements. As Bourdillon remarks, “the traditional therapists’ concern for their patients and their superior ability to deal with psychological aspects of the troubles of their clients whom they understand so well, is now combined with a concern for hygiene and order and the dissemination of knowledge.”⁴⁸ Chavunduka’s study of traditional medicine showed how African peoples, in response to illness, make use of Western medical practice while at the same time they resort to traditional forms of divination and therapy. He concludes, “Today the two systems of medicine - traditional and scientific – operate side by side in the same social setting. Many people now take their illnesses to scientific medical practices in hospitals, clinics and private surgeries and others to traditional healers, that is, diviners or diviner/theraputists.”⁴⁹ In post-independent Zimbabwe Chavunduka has continued to call for the re-appraisal of traditional medicine through the national organization that he presides over, the Zimbabwe Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA).

African Independent Churches and Pentecostal churches have contributed to calls for an indigenous African Christianity and theology. Research on Independent Churches in Zimbabwe is inspired by the missiologist Marthinus Daneel who treats the Shona medical beliefs and concepts in the context of these indigenous religious trends. His assertion that Independent Churches are an attempt to link traditional practices and Christianity is crucial. The following has been said of them, “They represent on the whole a positive effort to interpret Christianity according to African insights, especially at the point where indigenous customs and world views are challenged by the new world of the Bible”.⁵⁰ Daneel says the greatest contributory factor to the

⁴⁶R. P. Hatendi, “Shona Marriage and the Christian Churches” in *Christianity South of the Zambezi, Vol.1*, ed. A. J. Dachs (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1973), 146.

⁴⁷P. Wakatama, *Independence for the Third Church: An African Perspective on Missionary Work* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1976), 102.

⁴⁸M. C. F. Bourdillon, *Christianity...*, 8.

⁴⁹G. L. Chavunduka, “Traditional Medicine and Christian Beliefs”, in *Christianity South of the Zambezi, Vol.2*, ed. M. C. F. Bourdillon (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1977), 131.

⁵⁰M. L. Daneel, “The growth and significance of Shona Independent Churches” in *Christianity South of the Zambezi, Vol.2*, ed. M. C. F. Bourdillon (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1977), 184.

growth of these churches is the healing treatment by African prophets. He maintains that this healing is modelled on traditional patterns. He compares the diagnosis and therapy in healing treatment of the *n'anga* and of the prophet and notes striking parallels.

According to Daneel, most problems, particularly those threatening life and health, are ascribed to "stereotype conflict patterns".⁵¹ This includes a living enemy who causes illness through witchcraft, an ancestral or alien spirit who causes illness as a sign of calling the afflicted person to carry out some duty, and a spirit with a legitimate claim to some form of restitution. However, unlike the traditional medical practitioner who advises the patient to give in to the demands of the spirits, the prophets reject them and claim that via the Holy Spirit they drive them away.

Daneel also states that prophets undertake ventures to control or eradicate wizardry (*uroyi*).⁵² This service is rendered to society at large and nowadays the *n'anga* and the prophets are both used and consulted to detect cases of witchcraft. However, "other prophets specialise in treating the bewitched through the removal of *uroyi* medicines from the patient's body".⁵³ Other prophets exorcise dirty spirits. Before Holy Communion is taken, the prophets identify witches. This, Daneel notes, is "yet another attempt to introduce Christian notions into the deeper recesses of traditional beliefs".⁵⁴ The case studies presented in *Zionism and Faith Healing in Rhodesia* (1970), show that the prophetic role of healing and dealing with evil powers is really an attracting factor. When accompanying the prophet and the *n'anga*, "while the *n'anga* seeks for a solution which accedes to the conditions of the spirits, the prophetic therapy bases itself on a belief in the Christian God, which surpasses all other powers."⁵⁵

African theological reflection has also preoccupied several scholars in Zimbabwe, such as Canaan Banana, Sebastian Bakare, Gwinyai Muzorewa, and Ambrose Moyo, especially between 1980 and 2000. This preoccupation was exacerbated by the attainment of political independence in Zimbabwe in 1980 that naturally saw an increase in literature on African theology. A distinguished theological profile has come from Canaan Banana, both as political State President 1980-1987 and as a Methodist Pastor and also as University Professor of Religious Studies 1988-2004. Banana's main locale has been political in which he espoused socialist ideologies that challenged the church to show solidarity with the poor. He has also paid attention to issues that pertain to the gospel and culture. Banana also vehemently condemned oppressive ideology whether perpetrated by Christianity or corrupt political leadership. As Head of State he called for 'Re-writing of the Bible'.⁵⁶ Although with a public life shrouded in controversy,

⁵¹M. L. Daneel, "The growth and significance...", 189.

⁵²M. L. Daneel, "The growth and significance...", 191.

⁵³M. L. Daneel, "The growth and significance...", 191.

⁵⁴M. L. Daneel, "The growth and significance...", 192.

⁵⁵M. L. Daneel, *Zionism and Faith Healing in Rhodesia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 43.

⁵⁶See I. Mukonyora, "The fulfilment of African religious needs through the Bible" in *Rewriting the Bible: The real issues*, eds. I. Mukonyora et al (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1993), 249-262.

Banana has become a distinguished scholar: "Forceful, articulate and committed, Banana's rating as a leading Zimbabwean theologian is not without justification."⁵⁷ Hallencreutz describes him as an "Independent African Theologian".⁵⁸

Gwinyai Muzorewa, another prominent theologian, proclaimed a political theological approach. His emphasis is on the fact that the Shona are monotheists and he called for an African theology of mission.⁵⁹ Ambrose Moyo's study relates the gospel to African culture.⁶⁰ He argues that there has always been a link between the ancestors, people and God. This same idea of a link between humans, ancestors and *Mwari*, the Supreme Shona God, prevails in such theological works as that of Fr. Zvarevashe.

Some female scholars in Zimbabwe have also contributed insights on African Theology. Notable are some members of the Circle of Concerned African Theologians such as Isabel Mukonyora and Lillian Chirairo. Isabel scoffs at tradition and Christian religions that marginalize women and proffers a feminist theology of liberation against patriarchal dominance.⁶¹ Lillian highlights women prophets that operate from within the traditional milieu as exemplified by mission and deliverance in *Zvikomborero* Apostolic Faith Church.⁶² Elizabeth Maaraidzo Mutambara analysed Council of Churches' Projects, emphasising the dire need for land by rural women.⁶³ Eunice Marima analyses the Zimbabwean church's contextualisation on issues of land and HIV/AIDS.⁶⁴

Since the land issue had been the primary reason for fighting the liberation war, the issue undoubtedly attracted attention in post-independence Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe's land reform, was moved by Robert Mugabe and championed by war veterans. Its corollary was a clean-up exercise called *Operation Murambatsvina*. It has been sharply criticized by politicians, economists and human rights organizations locally and internationally. This has given new impetus on black consciousness against

⁵⁷E. Chitando, "Rewrapping the Christian Faith...", 13.

⁵⁸C. F. Hallencreutz, *On Theological Relevance...*, 5.

⁵⁹See G. H. Muzorewa, *An African Theology of Mission* (Lewinston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).

⁶⁰See A. Moyo, "The quest for African Theology and the Problem of the Relationship between Faith and culture: The Hermeneutical Perspective", *African Theological Journal* 12 (1983): 95-108.

⁶¹See I. Mukonyora, "The fulfilment of the African needs...", 249-262.

⁶²L. Chirairo-Dube, "Mission and deliverance in the *Zvikomborero* Apostolic Faith" in *African Christian Outreach, Vol. 1, African Initiated Churches*, ed. M. L. Daneel (South Africa: South African Missiological Society, 2001), 294-311.

⁶³E. M. Mutambara, "The development approach of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches: A case study of the Women's Training and Development department" in *The role of Christianity in development, Peace, and Reconstruction*, eds. I. Phiri and J. Cox (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1996), 176.

⁶⁴See E. Marima, "The Church and its contextualisation...", where this has been discussed.

imperialism. A leading theologian, Sebastian Bakare, upholds the African's legitimate entitlement to land,⁶⁵ through Biblical references to land ownership. He stresses the point that land is mother, source of life. For him, humans are totally dependent on the land for survival and their dependence on it is experienced in various ways. When God created human beings in Genesis 1: 24-26, the land is there to provide humans with food for survival. As a mother she is there to nurture all her children. In a country like Zimbabwe that is often subjected to drought, humankind depends upon the produce that comes from land; hence the emphasis on land is important.⁶⁶ Chitando notes the appropriation of religious themes in the political discourse in Zimbabwe.⁶⁷

Alongside Bakare's theme on the land, Daneel injected new reflections on eco-theology. His studies on Shona African Independent Churches reveal that the new religious movements have not only made distinct and innovative mission models that encompass spiritual renewal but also environmental-based theology. This theology has global significance.⁶⁸ Such contributions add new dimensions of theology to the corpus of literature on the subject in Zimbabwe.

The development of African Theology in Zimbabwe expresses itself at tertiary institutions in the country. Although the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy (RSCP) altered its name from Theology prior to independence, the Department has continued to offer African, Political and Systematic Theology courses amongst its widened curriculum. Plenty of theses and dissertations have been produced in this field. A total of seven theological colleges that teach theology are associated with the University's Department of RSCP: Arrupe, Wadzanai, Chishawasha, St Augustine's (All Catholic); United Theological College (Protestant); Gweru Baptist Seminary and CCOSA (Ecumenical). Additionally, church sponsored universities have also been established: Africa University (Methodist); Solusi (Seventh Day Adventist) and Catholic University. Two other colleges used to teach the course in the past: Gaul House (Anglican) and Domboshawa (Ecumenical). New church-related universities that will potentially teach theology are proposed for the future: Lutheran and Anglican Universities. Several other Bible training centres and theological schools and colleges run by Mainline, Pentecostal and Independent Churches do exist in Zimbabwe. Most are staffed by personnel trained in theology and who cultivate the interaction between Christianity and traditional religion and culture. Current themes under scholarly debate and reflection include: Environment, Globalisation, Human Rights, Gender, HIV/AIDS, Media, Film, Technology, Post-War Conflict; Migration. Theological reflections also dominate platforms for inter-religious dialogue

⁶⁵See S. Bakare, *My right to land in the Bible and in Zimbabwe: A theology of the land in Zimbabwe* (Zimbabwe Council of Churches, 1993).

⁶⁶S. Bakare, *My right to land...*, 3.

⁶⁷See Ezra Chitando, "In the beginning was the land: The Appropriation of Religious Themes in Political Discourse in Zimbabwe" *Journal of the International African Institute*, 75:2 (July 2005), where this has been discussed.

⁶⁸M. L. Daneel, *African Christian Outreach...*, xvi.

with Judaism, Islam, and Hindu etc., that reflect Zimbabwe's multi-faith approach to religious education. As calls for "a global village" increase, possibilities are envisaged to engage in a multidisciplinary approach that takes into account social, political, economic, legal and medical disciplines that cut across racial and ethnic divisions and transcend local, regional, and international levels.

In conclusion, it has been noted in this chapter that African theological reflection in Zimbabwe between 1965 and 1980 was characterized by a passionate search for the true character of ATRs. In addition, the need to respect African practices within the Church such as drumming, whistling and vigorous dancing has been underlined. Shona belief in God before the missionary efforts, the mediatory role of the ancestors, and traditional medical practices are topics that have been discussed. It has been observed that there is a need to creatively interact with African cultural dynamics and values of the liberation struggle since all have been fertile ground for African theological reflection. The period from 1980-2000 has brought about a new dispensation that has nurtured deeper theological reflection in the fields of liberation theology, political theology, feminist theology, systematic theology etc on issues such as land, human rights, 'black' market, corruption, gender etc. The challenge for theology in Zimbabwe is to pursue inter-religious dialogue and engage in an interdisciplinary approach that translates into a universal gospel of Christ that appeals to all humankind.

CHAPTER TEN

The Role of Liberation Theology in the Post-Independent Africa and the World in the 21st Century

Moji Africa Ruele

Introduction

The question as to whether or not Liberation theology is relevant today remains a significant problem area for many people. The difficulty is brought about by the end of the wars of freedom and subsequent attainment of political independence by the former colonies. However, oppressive issues such as poverty, gender disparity and HIV & AIDS still make Liberation theology relevant. This chapter attempts to define Liberation theology, highlight its tasks and sources, and apply its methods to contemporary social ills. It will also discuss a range of issues challenging its *modus operandi*.¹ Behind my discussion of this topic are questions asked by my colleagues and students such as ‘how has the demise of Colonialism and Apartheid affected the relevance of Liberation theologians?’ As an attempt to respond to the above questions I intend to deal with how Liberation theologians understand social ills as forms of oppression that require a liberative approach.

What Is Liberation Theology?

Liberation theology refers to a movement which began in the mid-1960s, but became influential in shaping the thinking and practice of Christians all over the world. It represents an attempt to think theologically and act practically about the plight of the marginalised people. As a social and intellectual movement, it first appeared in Latin America, but later on found ground in the actual struggles for liberation in the colonised countries of the Third World where it has remained relevant because of pressing social issues.² Liberation theology has also taken root among the poor, blacks and oppressed women. Today, this movement has come under great scrutiny with some people

¹*Modus Operandi* is a Latin Phrase often abbreviated as *M.O.* and approximately translates as ‘*Mode of Operation*’. As a noun and as used in this chapter, it means an unvarying or habitual method of working.

²Andrew Kirk, “Liberation Theology,” in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor Hart (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 318.

dismissing it as irrelevant. According to Rebecca Chopp, Liberation theology as a term was first used in 1973 by Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian Roman Catholic priest. He belonged to a school of thought among Latin American Catholics who argued that the Gospel of Christ demands that the Church concentrate its efforts on liberating the people from physical and spiritual oppression.³ As a movement, it attempts to interpret the scriptures through the experiences of the oppressed poor. To ensure that this happens, it has structures and institutions which attempt to synthesise spiritual and physical liberation. To give an example, it has the basic idea of reflecting on the Bible and fighting for social justice through Christian-based communities/committees. Though the verb 'liberate' is perhaps too passive to do justice to the agency of those who founded and forged with it, Michael Novak observes that the word 'liberate' means 'to release from bondage.'⁴ According to him, 'to be liberated' means to be free and able to fulfil one's capacities as a human being.⁵ Although the word 'liberation' is not common in many English Bibles, it is related to the word 'liberty' used in the books of Galatians (5:13RSV) and Romans (8:21RSV) where Christ is referred to as the liberator. Carlton Clymer Rodee defines liberty as the freedom of the individual or group from external restraint imposed by other individuals, groups, government, society, or restrictive conditions. Such liberty, enjoyed in, not apart from human society, is not absolute, but necessarily relative.⁶ However, the relative importance of particular liberties has varied with time and context. With changing circumstances, society re-allocates liberties among groups and classes. Thus, the concern at a given time may not just be the availability or absence of liberty, but liberty for which group in society? Liberty may also take many forms such as political, civil, religious, cultural, social and economic. Any restrictions imposed in one sphere of liberty lead inevitably to the destruction of all liberty, and at the same time make the desire for liberation necessary. Christianity, as a religion on which Liberation theology is founded, also stresses the importance of individual liberty. As Marian Hillar argues, Liberation Theology is a result of systematic, disciplined reflection on Christian faith and the practical lives of the people. The theologians who first formulated it were not necessarily academics or intellectuals, but a group of clergy who had direct contact with the people at the grassroots level.⁷ Hillar's view is also shared by Philip Berryman who notes that 'Liberation theology is an interpretation of

³Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 1-16.

⁴Michael Novak, *Will it liberate? Questions about Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 13.

⁵M. Novak *Will it liberate*, 13.

⁶Carlton Clymer Rodee, "Liberty," in *Colliers Encyclopedia*, ed. Bernard Jonston (New York: P.F. Collier, Inc., 1993), 555-556

⁷Marian Hillar, "Liberation Theology: Religious Response to Social Problems. A survey", in *Humanism and Social Issues, Anthology of Essays*, eds. M. Hillar and H. R. Leuchtag (Houston: American Humanist Association, 1993), 35 -52.

the Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle and hope of the poor'.⁸ Liberation theology is about the liberation of the oppressed in their totality as persons, body and soul. The poor are not merely human beings with needs, or just persons who are socially oppressed. Instead, they are people in a quest for liberation. In his book entitled *A Theology of Liberation*, a leading theorist of Liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, discusses the character, nature and functions of this movement as a liberation project. He notes that Liberation theology is a reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish any unjust situation and to build a free society.⁹ This view is also shared by Peter Phan who states that even though it is customary to refer to Liberation theology in the singular, it is obvious from its history that it is by no means a homogeneous and uniform movement¹⁰. That is why in spite of its inception in Latin America, it has been practised all over the world. It has also targeted various contexts of oppression such as class, as is the case in Latin America Liberation theology, race in North America and South Africa, culture in colonial Africa, Mujerista in Asia, sexual orientation in gay and lesbian theologies, and gender, women, or feminist theology, just to mention a few examples. In this case different contexts have produced interesting variations, but the core characteristics of liberation theology have remained as Peter Phan notes,

That in this sense it is appropriate to refer to Liberation theology in the plural rather than singular, since it takes into account all diversities of the people they represent. It is important to note that even though these forms of responses to oppression are often widespread in the world, they are often intimately interlocked with each other and mutually reinforcing. In that case, it is appropriate to refer to Liberation theology in the plural rather than in singular since it takes into account all the diversities of the people they represent.¹¹

The Historical Origins of Liberation Theology

To understand Latin American Liberation theology it is indispensable to understand how Latin America became part of European expansionism and Western Christianity in the first place. The roots of both contemporary conflicts on the continent, and different liberation movements and discourse, including Liberation theology, can be traced back to the conquest period following it.¹² As articulated by Latin American Liberation theologians, it has been a critique of the unjust social and economic structures.¹³ There are a number of crucial reference points for the beginning of this movement.

⁸Phillip Berryman, (1987) "Liberation Theology and the Great Revolutionary Fantasy" Book review by Paul Gray (2001-04) Umbria Associates, 12.

⁹Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 45

¹⁰Peter Phan "Methods in Liberation Theologies", in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 61 (2000): 24.

¹¹Ibid, 2.

¹²Elina Vuola, *Limits of Liberation: Feminist Theology and the Ethics of Poverty and Reproduction* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 18.

¹³Ibid, 2.

For example, in 1965, some Third World bishops present at Vatican II issued a pastoral letter concerning the shame of endemic poverty in their respective dioceses. In 1966, the World Council of Churches convened an international conference to consider issues of social injustice, and in 1968, Latin American bishops held a second conference to discuss peace and justice a place called Medellin, Colombia. However, this movement only came into prominence when it was adopted by the World Council of Churches—first in Bangkok, Thailand in 1973, and then in Nairobi, Kenya in 1975. As a theology, it has very strong Roman Catholic roots and links because of the input from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) which contributed to its philosophy. Three distinctive stages can be identified in relation to the development of this movement. The first stage is often referred to as the *Preparatory stage* (1962-1968) which started with Vatican II and attended by John XXIII. The second stage is the one often referred to as the *Formative phase* (1968-1975) when as a theology it started to extend to other groups and countries outside Latin America. During the formative stage, this theology started spreading into other blends of theologies such as black theology, feminist theology, and ecotheology. The third and last stage saw Liberation theology assuming cultural blends in Africa and Asia.¹⁴

Some Leading Founders of Liberation Theology

There are many different people and various councils which contributed to the inception, theories and development of Liberation theology. Some of these people were not Liberation theologians, or poor people, but Church leaders who were simply concerned with the plight of their followers, or the role of the Christian faith and social justice. Others were university-educated members of the élite who were not so much involved with the poor.¹⁵ Juan Luis Segundo, also called the ‘dean’ of Liberation theology, was himself a scholar of high repute. Born in Montevideo, Uruguay, Segundo studied theology in Argentina before he was ordained a Jesuit priest in 1955. Though well-known for his book *The Liberation of Theology*, first published in 1975, he was a prolific writer who contributed significantly to the foundation of this movement by authoring many books which challenged traditional theologians/ies. In the above-mentioned book he followed the footsteps of Gustavo Gutierrez and developed a new method of doing Liberation theology, known as the hermeneutical circle.¹⁶ The hermeneutic presupposition seeks to expose the ideological bias in biblical interpretation.¹⁷ However, the name most frequently associated with the founding of Latin American liberation theology is that of Gustavo Gutierrez. Born in 1928 in Lima,

¹⁴Ibid, 3.

¹⁵Juan Segundo, “The Hermeneutical Circle,” in *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader*, ed. Deane William Fenn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 64-92.

¹⁶R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Post-Colonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 106.

¹⁷Ibid, 106.

Peru, Gutierrez was an ordained priest and former professor of theology at the Catholic University of Lima. Gutierrez is often referred to as the founding father of this movement. He is best known for his famous book *A Theology of Liberation*, which was first published in 1971. According to Rebecca Chopp, this book has remained the basic text of the movement since its inception and up to today.¹⁸ Another founder of Liberation theology is Jose Miguez Bonino who is credited with identifying the ideological bias of doing traditional theology and with linking social location with biblical interpretation.¹⁹ Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who is well-known for his classic book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he outlines a philosophy of popular education known as *Conscientization*, originally implemented his philosophy in Brazil in the early 1960s. Conscientization—*Conscientizacao*—involved political education and community participation in bringing about change.²⁰ Leonardo Boff was born on 14th December 1938, in Corcoda, Estado de Santa Catarina, Brazil. He was a professor of theology at the Jesuit Institute for Philosophy and Theology in Petropolis, a prominent writer of many books, and a renowned philosopher who articulated his ideas by writing on behalf of the poor throughout Brazil. He became a controversial figure within the Catholic Church, not only for his support of left-wing regimes, but also for his alleged support of homosexuality. An ardent advocate of the human rights cause, who worked closely with the Brazilian Landless Movement and helped in the establishment of ecclesial base communities (CEBs) (*Comunidades de base*) among poor Catholics in Brazil and Latin America, he and others used the teachings of Christ as a social gospel to liberate the people. Leonardo Boff found much of the justification for his work in Chapter 1, No 8 of *Lumen Gentium* 'Light of the Nations', one of the principal documents of Vatican II. He was silenced in 1985 through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith directed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, for his criticism of the Roman Catholic Church and for advocating Marxism in his book *The Church, Charisma and Power*.²¹ Jon Sobrino, nicknamed S. J. also made enormous contributions to the foundation of Liberation theology. He was born on 23rd December 1938, in the town of Bilbao, Spain. Among his major roles was the proclamation of the Gospel of Justice in a world of global capitalism, and the future of Liberation theology. He studied engineering in St Louis in the United States and then theology in Frankfurt in West Germany. He was instrumental in the founding

¹⁸Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering*, 11.

¹⁹R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Post-Colonial Criticism*...., 106.

²⁰The term *Conscientizacao* refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradiction, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality. See Paulo Freire, Preface and translator's note in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), 17.

²¹Harvey Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff: Liberation Theology and the future of World Christianity*, (New York: Meyer Stone Books, 1988), 1-4.

of a Jesuit-run University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador. His major contribution to the formation of Liberation theology came through two of his well-known books, *Christology at the Crossroads* and *the True Church and the Poor*.²²

Tasks of Liberation Theology

The character of Liberation theology shows that it is a movement with a philosophy of emancipation. It aims at the creation of a just society through Christian faith. Juan Segundo amplifies this point by saying, 'while faith is much more to do with salvation, works is what is needed in [a] real life situation.'²³ Earlier on, Gutierrez argued that Liberation theology provides Christians with the opportunity to actualise their faith into their concrete lives.²⁴ This perspective is also found in James 2:14-26 which states 'faith without works is dead'. In other words, faith and works are complementary and neither of the two can be appreciated separately. The Locus of Liberation theology is bringing faith and the good works to the people. Hence, the Liberationist asserts that accepting Jesus means doing God's work of liberation for the poor.²⁵ Therefore in tackling poverty, Liberationists make a critical reflection on theology and combine faith with a Marxist-inspired notion of praxis. They contend that *Ortho-praxis*, which provides a non-doctrinal focus and an alternative model for understanding the functioning of religion in a given community, rather than *Orthodoxy*, which adheres strictly to the tenets of religious law, must be used as the best criterion for doing theology and fighting poverty.²⁶ In accomplishing this task, structures known as Ecclesial Base Communities are created, whereby the Christian poor live, worship and study the Bible together.²⁷ Liberationists analyse the cause of poverty and make an effort to support those affected. According to Carlos Mesters, Ecclesial Base Communities are made up of grassroots

²²Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 185-6.

²³Juan Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan 1976), 81.

²⁴Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 155-160.

²⁵Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 157.

²⁶The term Orthodoxy technically refers to the 'right belief' in contrast to error or heresy. It is often used to indicate the official and normative teachings of any group. It is rooted in the doctrinal, theological, and ecclesial teaching and existence. Orthopraxis is derived from Greek 'Orthos' meaning 'straight', or 'right' and 'praxis' meaning 'doing' or 'practice'. Orthopraxis may be interpreted to mean a body of practices. See Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), 147 and *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, eds. David J. Atkinson and David Field, (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 643.

²⁷Clodovis Boff, *Feet-on-The-Ground Theology: A Brazilian Journey*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1987), 9.

Christian and common people who are brought together by the word of God.²⁸ Outlining the importance of these groups, Phillip Berryman writes that, as tiny as they are, Base Communities have undeniable spin-off effects in the political process of the time. They function as cadre schools and produce leaders for the Church.²⁹ Base Communities also provide a training and recruitment facility for Liberation theologies where complex ideas are discussed and explained to the illiterate people. Ecclesial Base Communities are a force for social change as they develop among the poor an awareness of their spiritual and material problems. Leonardo Boff notes that Base Christian Communities are places where Liberation theology is lived concretely, and where the poor understand that poverty is not natural, but results from institutional structures of governance.³⁰

Sources and Norms of Liberation Theology

Funk and Wagnall's Dictionary defines sources as 'that from which any act, movement or effect proceeds. It is a place where something is derived or a beginning of something'.³¹

The sources of Christian theology are generally the same and interdependent. They are all grounded on the belief that God provides us with revelation. It is through these sources that He chooses to disclose truths and make Himself known to humanity. Sources are oriented towards God's revelation and activities in human history. In other words, sources of theology help us to discover who God is. In Liberation theology sources are often influenced by context. The act by Liberation theologians in general of imposing their own definition of the sources and norms is one way of re-claiming their own image of the sacredness of divinity and self-actualisation. This happens as the marginalised get more and more detached from the dominant groups who may have claimed all the public sphere including the Church and theology. Below I attempt to make apt definitions of the sources of Liberation theology.

Scripture

These are the sacred writings that are usually believed to be based on the work of the founder of the faith or of their earliest disciples and at times are referred to as the very word of God. For example, the Torah is attributed to Moses, the New Testament to disciples of Jesus. These writings are important because among the Christians and Jews scripture is accorded authority. However, differences do exist between fundamentalists who believe that the Bible is divinely inspired and liberal Christians for whom

²⁸Carlos Mesters, "The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People" in *The Bible and Liberation: Political & Social Hermeneutics*, eds. Norman K. Gotwald & Richard A. Horsely, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 4.

²⁹Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology*..., 1-4.

³⁰Harvey Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff*..., 3.

³¹*Funk & Wagnall's Standard Dictionary, Comprehensive International Edition* (1978), 1200

it is a fallible human attestation of revelation, but not revelation itself. Nonetheless, wherever scriptures exist, they provide an important source for theology even when modern critical methods are applied. As such, Christian Liberation theology uses the scripture as one of its main sources. It does so by interpreting the Gospel in the light of contemporary challenges. Liberation theologians believe that the scripture contains the message of human liberation. For example, the exodus from Egypt (Leviticus 25: 38), which states 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan' is a prototype of liberation constituting a basic paradigm of the God-saving action.

Tradition and Experience

Bradley Hanson defines Christian tradition as the teachings and practices that are handed down from generation to generation. Tradition is another means by which the original revelation is conveyed and mediated. Tradition precedes scriptures in the sense that stories of founders were passed by word of mouth before they were documented.³² But tradition also continues after scripture, for instance, when the believing community has to interpret a whole body of knowledge alongside the original scripture it may even be written down as a new tradition.³³ It is important to note that whereas in some Christian circles, such as Roman Catholicism, tradition is more strongly upheld and the Bible highly promoted, in the Protestant denominations of late, *experience* has become an important influence on theology. Therefore contemporary theologians tend to draw more on present experience, either personal or that of community. This helps the theologian to search for the meaning of God not only in religious experiences, but also in cultural, social and political experience of the time. According to Gareth Jones, experience is that which involves sensory perception and reflection upon it.³⁴ For Edward Schillebeeckx experience is learning through 'direct' contact with people and things.³⁵ In Liberation theology, experience is used as implying, or being involved in or aware of the historical reality of the exclusion of the poor and the dominant ideological bias in tradition. This bias is at times replicated in the symbolic universe in the imagery of divine-human relations.³⁶

³²Bradley Hanson, *Introduction to Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 5.

³³Richard Lennan, *An Introduction to Catholic Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 21.

³⁴Gareth Jones, *Christian Theology: A Brief Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwells (Polity Press), 1999), 53.

³⁵E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 31.

³⁶Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Feminist Critique in Religious Studies" in *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy*, eds. Elizabeth Langland & Walter Gove (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1981), 54.

Revelation and Reason

In the words of Charles Barrett, to reveal something about [the] nature of reality is aptly called revelatory.³⁷ To reveal is to make self-disclosure of one's self or to make oneself known. Within Christian theology, revelation basically means the activity by which God discloses himself to human beings. The activity is often mediated to human experience by the Church. It can be an experience of a religious or personal kind. Revelation provides a great starting point for the relationship between experience and reason. Both of them play an important point in receiving and understanding of revelation. In that case, they are the sources of theology. For Richard Lennan, experience within theology is concerned with our experience of God as a community of faith, to bring it to expression in language and symbol.³⁸ Reason is important because it is logical, rational, and analytical thought. It is a power that can be used to reflect upon, understand, and express experiences. Charles Barrett characterises it within theology as being a human power employed to move toward God.³⁹ This makes reason a source of theology as it provides a way to reflect upon and communicate our experiences with or to God. This, however, happens and can only happen because God has revealed Himself to humanity in many ways. According to Robert Schreiter, a contextual model of theology begins with context, and world events become the very sources of the theological enterprise along with scripture and tradition.⁴⁰ Liberation theologians use the experiences of the oppressed and the Christian tradition to rediscover an alternative history and tradition that supports their liberation and inclusion in institutions of society.

Some Strengths and Weaknesses of Liberation Theology

Dennis McCann notes that Liberation theology has been the most successful in challenging the dominant styles of academic theology, something which is a great and effective task of prophetic witness.⁴¹ Liberation theology marked the beginning of an epoch in which the Church of the south asserted its independence from the predominant theologies of the North Atlantic. According to D. Webster, the strength of Liberation theology is in its compassion for the poor.⁴² Liberation theology has also explored systematically the relationship between theoretical thinking and concrete action, between social analysis, theological reflection and between the faiths of the Church based on

³⁷Charles D. Barrett, *Understanding the Christian Faith*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 180.

³⁸Richard Lennan, *An Introduction to Catholic Theology*, 22.

³⁹Charles D. Barrett, *Understanding the Christian Faith*, 132.

⁴⁰Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 12.

⁴¹Dennis P. McCann, "Liberation Theology", in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, eds. J. Macquarrie and James Childress (London: SCM Press, 1967), 349-350.

⁴²D.D. Webster, "Liberation Theology: Advanced Information" in *Elwell Evangelical Dictionary* <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/liberati.htm> (February 07, 2006), 2-6

the Bible and its structures. According to Andrew Kirk, it has also restored a prophetic-critical dimension to theology different from traditional theologies.⁴³ Although Liberation theology is partially compatible with Catholic social teaching as expressed in several official statements, it has been criticised by the Vatican for its relationship with Marxist concepts that tends towards materialism.⁴⁴ That is why Pope John Paul II largely put an end to official support for Liberation theology among the Catholic Church hierarchy by his statement in January 1979 on his visit to Mexico. He also accused it of presenting Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, and as a subversive character, something which is against the teachings of the Church.⁴⁵ In spite of John Paul himself acknowledging that Marxism contained within it a 'Kernel of truth' about the exploitative nature of capitalism, Cardinal Ratzinger condemned Liberation theology and accused it of having Marxist tendencies and of according predominance to *orthopraxis* over *orthodoxy*.⁴⁶ All those who supported it, like Leonardo Boff, were suspended, while others were silenced. In 1983, Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, sent ten observations on Gustavo Gutierrez's theology, accusing him of politically interpreting and misinterpreting the Bible. During 1980-90, Ratzinger continued his doctrinal condemnation of Liberation theology, prohibiting some priests from teaching, or going as far as excommunicating others such as Tissa Balasuriya of Sri Lanka. Under Ratzinger's influence, theological institutions and schools were prohibited from teaching Liberation theology. On his travels to Managua in Nicaragua, John Paul II harshly condemned what he dubbed the 'Popular Church' represented by the Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs) and spoke vociferously against the Nicaraguan clergy's support of the Sandinistas.⁴⁷ Liberation theology was accused of stirring Christians to the socio-political impact of Jesus's life and death, but failing to ground Jesus's uniqueness in the reality of his deity.⁴⁸ Liberation theology was also accused of giving Marxism an almost ontological status. Liberation theology's emphasis upon the poor was also seen as giving the impression that the poor are not only the object of God's concern, but the salvific and revelatory subject. Furthermore, Liberation theology politicizes the gospel to the point that the poor are offered a solution that could be provided with or without Jesus Christ.⁴⁹ For Cardinal Ratzinger, Liberation theology constitutes a fundamental

⁴³Andrew Kirk, "Liberation Theology," in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, p320.

⁴⁴Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology*..., 3

⁴⁵See John Kirk (1985) "John Paul II and the Exorcism of Liberation Theology: A retrospective look at the Pope in Nicaragua" in *Bulletin of Latin American research*, Vol. 4, No.1, 33-47, Published by Blackwell Publishing on behalf of Society for Latin American Studies.

⁴⁶*Ibid*, 2.

⁴⁷Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger: "Liberation Theology", 'Preliminary notes to a "private" document which preceded the instruction of fall 1984', *Christendom Awake Website*, <<http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/ratzinger/liberationtheol.htm>> (January 28, 2006), 1-2.

⁴⁸*Ibid*, 3.

⁴⁹*Ibid*, 5.

threat to the faith of the Church, as it sees itself as a new way of understanding Christianity. So, too, it alters all forms of Church life, constitution, liturgy, catechesis and moral options.⁵⁰

Methods in Liberation Theology

K.M. Evans defines method as an orderly, arranged, systematic plan or organised procedure and analytic process of dealing with the research problem.⁵¹ This view is also shared by Judith Bell who defines methods as a process of coming to know where we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. Methodology, she notes, is a way or the process.⁵² Method varies and largely depends on the degree of importance attached to the various sources and contexts. For example, Liberation theologians do not begin with authoritative texts, but instead, they begin with analysing human experience and problems, before returning to traditional wisdom or the text. The principal types of theological method are obviously capable of being carried out in different ways. Every major theologian has a method that in its detail is unique, but which nonetheless involves many procedures similar to those of other theologians. It is important to note that many of the methods of theology are similar to those employed by experts in other disciplines. Since its inception, Liberation theology has offered the theological guild throughout the whole world a new way of doing theology. That is why some critics have accused it of being nothing but a methodology that lacks ascertainable content.⁵³ However, the fact that its method differed from that used by traditional theology gave it character, weight, and distinctiveness. The method of Liberation theology is based on three main steps. First, the description of the Church and its role in the world—this step involves the use of social sciences in making a structural analysis of the situation. Second, biblical and doctrinal reflection on the situation described, and thirdly, pastoral work in defending the rights of the poor. The methodological approach to doing theology is more grounded on the concrete experience of the people. This is done by making an analysis of the socio-economic problems and acting on them to bring change. In this case Liberation theology is interested in transforming the world.⁵⁴

Critical Reflection on the Historical Praxis

Gustavo Gutierrez defines theology as critical reflection on historical praxis, i.e. reflecting on reality as it develops out of praxis.⁵⁵ The word praxis comes from the Greek *prasso* which means practice. It involves practical action on behalf of the poor

⁵⁰Ibid, 6.

⁵¹K.M Evans, *Planning Small-Scale Research* (London: National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales, 1984), 15.

⁵²Judith Bell, *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers in Education and Social Science* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1988), 3.

⁵³D.D. Webster, "Liberation Theology...", 3

⁵⁴Ibid, 3

⁵⁵Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 158.

and oppressed. Praxis also refers to the discovery and formation of theological truth out of a given historical situation.⁵⁶ Doing theology, therefore, requires the theologian to be immersed in his or her own intellectual and socio-political context. This makes theology a dynamic, ongoing exercise involving contemporary insights into knowledge (epistemology), man (anthropology) and history (social context). Furthermore, praxis means more than the application of theological truth to a given situation. It means the discovery and the formation of theological truth out of a given situation. Critical reflection helps the Church to fulfil its prophetic function by interpreting historical events, and calls the Church and theology to be critical of itself and society at large. The point of departure for doing Liberation theology and for applying any method is the social context. The Church then expands its mission of charity to include active participation in constructing a just order. This active form of charity is called 'praxis'. That is to say, according to the praxis model, the Church has a duty to act as an agent of liberation by articulating its words, its catechesis, liturgy and interventions with established authority in the direction of liberation. Praxis as used here means a way of knowing and doing. It means learning by reflecting on experience. According to Segundo, this method makes Liberation theology unique in the sense that, unlike others, it cannot be learned, but instead it is born out of the people's experiences of life.⁵⁷ In other words, the main methodological innovation of Liberation theology is to do theology i.e., speak of God, from the viewpoint of the economically poor and oppressed of the human community. In that way, it is an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor's suffering, their struggle and hope. It is also a critique of society through the eyes of the poor. Jon Sobrino observes 'the poor are the channel of God's grace'.⁵⁸ His view point is shared by Phillip Berryman, who says 'theology is an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor's suffering, their struggle, hope, and a critique of society and Christianity through the eyes of the poor'.⁵⁹

Hermeneutical Presuppositions

According to Juan Segundo, Hermeneutical presuppositions refer to the theological reading of social reality in the light of the Christian faith.⁶⁰ This process helps in bringing Liberation theology close to the reader of scripture. It also helps in empowering and making appeal to the oppressed. In order to understand this concept vividly, the following

⁵⁶Praxis as a concept and as used by Latin American Social Scientists comes from the Greek word *Prasso*, meaning practice; See Edward L. Cleary & Germán Garrido-Pinto "Applied Social Science, Teaching and Political Action" in *Human Organization*, 36,3, (Fall 1977), 270.

⁵⁷Alfred T. Hennelly, *Theologies in Conflict: The Challenge of Juan Luis Segundo* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 8.

⁵⁸Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator...*, 186.

⁵⁹Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America & Beyond* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 1-4.

⁶⁰Juan Segundo, (1976), *The Liberation of Theology*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 7.

question must be answered. What does hermeneutics mean and how is it an integral part of liberation theology's method? Hermeneutics means interpretation. In Liberation theology it used to refer to a process involving interpretation of the historical situation, biblical text, and context of the Christian ecclesial community. This, in a way, makes the hermeneutical process methodical. At the heart of this process is the hermeneutical circle which is the interplay between the scriptures, the context and the interpreting community. It seeks to read 'the signs of the times' by using simultaneously what is in the two books, i.e. the book of reality and the book of God.⁶¹ The method of the hermeneutical circle is based on the precondition of commitment to raising profound questions about the real situation, leading to new and profound interpretations of the Bible. Segundo developed the use of the hermeneutical circle with historical and contemporary examples, raising the questions of the relation of this method to the socio-economic and political analysis/social reality of his time. He argued that an analysis of the social situation leads to the formulation of a social theory that condemns unjust economic structures as the source of evil and provides a tool of analysis for Liberation theology. In this case, social theory becomes dialectical if it envisages the possibility of systematic change. In some cases Marxist analysis is used to understand the socio-economic situation. Segundo claims that methodology is the key, because it is needed in clarifying Liberation theology over against academic styles of theology and shows how to do theology in our real life situation.⁶² However J. Gonzalez, and C. Gonzalez observe that the circle is not a circle per se, but rather it is a spiral, continuing to build upon change as the experiences of life continue to shape the reader. Thus, each time we read the scripture, we are bringing the culmination of new experiences, suspicions, and old hermeneutics to the text, as well as the context that determines how we are able to read and understand the meaning of scripture.⁶³

Critical Reading of the Bible

Liberation theology, like other biblical theologies, takes the Bible as a primary source of Christian religious knowledge and for doing theology. It also regards the Bible as a liberating text. That is why Liberation theologians go to scripture bearing the whole weight of problems, sorrows, and hopes of the poor, seeking light and inspiration from the divine Word. This is a new way of reading the Bible which is often referred to as the hermeneutics of liberation.⁶⁴ Therefore when interpreting reality, Liberationists draw from the Bible the most eloquent themes such as God, the advocate of the poor and Liberator of the oppressed, the prophecy of a new and just world, the kingdom

⁶¹Juan Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 7.

⁶²Juan Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 8.

⁶³Justo Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *Liberation preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 38-48.

⁶⁴Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 8

given to the poor, and other verses relating to freedom in making a case for the poor. In this case, the plight of the poor is always done from the scriptural viewpoint. Examples are then drawn from the Old and New Testament on how God has always stood with the poor. Liberationists then invite the poor to make a contextual reading of both the Old and New Testament in order to address their problems.⁶⁵ In this case Biblical history is important because it models and illustrates the human quest for justice, even today. For example, Israel's liberation from Egypt as narrated in the book of Exodus, and Jesus' life and death stand out as the two prototypes for the contemporary human struggle for liberation. These biblical events are important because they signify the contemporary human spiritual and secular struggle for freedom. Exodus 8:1 is used as a paradigm of liberation whereby God participated in human history to set his people free. Other complementary verses such as Psalm 9: 9, which state that the Lord is a place for the oppressed, and Malachi 4:1-3 which urges people to overthrow the wicked oppressor in order to defend the poor, are often used together with Exodus 8:1. In the New Testament, Christ is seen as the liberator who frees all from sin, the cause of all slavery. For example, in Colossians 3, Christ is referred to as being for all people including the poor. The importance of Jesus for Liberation theology lies in his exemplary struggle for the poor and the outcast. His teaching and action on behalf of the Kingdom of God demonstrate the love of God in a historical situation that bears a striking similarity to the 21st century context. Jesus' incarnation is interpreted as his total immersion in a historical situation of conflict and oppression. Again, Jesus' uniqueness lies in his death on the cross, as it historicizes in exemplary fashion the suffering experienced by God in all the crosses (situations) of the oppressed. Liberation theology holds that through Jesus/God, all people are liberated.⁶⁶ For example, Luke 1:52-53 states that He will remove the powerful from their thrones and exalt the poor. The life of Jesus is interpreted as a struggle against the forces that humiliate and exclude from normal society the exploited poor, women, children and people of other races and beliefs. However, the question that arises is, what sort of Liberation does Jesus bring? Jesus brings complete, (both spiritual and physical) liberation. The poor referred to in Luke 4 are the poor both materially and spiritually. The proper response is something we can only receive as God reveals it through his Holy Spirit: 'This is my Son, my Beloved' (Mark 9:7, Matt. 16:16-17). Before being the liberator, Jesus is first of all Son of God. He is the liberator only because He is Son of God. The basis of his liberating role is his divine Sonship. Jesus Christ liberates from disease (Mark 9:14-23), hunger (Matt. 14:15-21) oppressions (Luke 19:22-25) racism/tribalism (2 Cor. 5:17-21), sin (John 8:30-59), and, above all, death (John 8:52-59; Luke 7:11-17), which is the worst

⁶⁵Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978), 9.

⁶⁶Andrew Kirk, "Liberation Theologies" in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor Hart (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 318-320.

slavery of all from which no one in the world can liberate, only God in Jesus Christ. In short, Liberation theologians hold the Bible as a standard on how they should behave, act and do theology. Over and over again the Bible speaks of seeking justice and giving aid to the poor: Isaiah 1:17, Jeremiah 22:3, Job 31:6. According to Boff, Liberation theology acts on the notion of faith. It argues that God takes sides with the poor against the 'Pharaohs' (oppressors) of life.⁶⁷ Throughout the Bible, Liberation theology talks about God setting the people free. It also argues that God sides with the oppressed.

Liberation Theology and Contemporary Social Challenges

In order to appreciate how theology deals with contemporary social challenges, it is important to note that all theologies are prefaced by a set of questions which theologians often try to answer. It is that set of questions that helps every theologian give appropriate answers and offer meaningful solutions to the problems of the people. Such questions also help the people to articulate a relevant theology at a given time in history. Most of these questions emerge from a specific context. Since they are context-based, Liberation theology starts by recognizing the significance of context in doing theology. If the context is characterised by poverty, oppression, and disease, then these social ills and contextual challenges become the basis and main factors influencing how one goes about doing theology. They also become the basic questions one has to respond to in the process of theologizing. In other words, all contemporary forms of oppression are some of the questions that Liberation theology tries to give explicit answers to. To give an example, what the poor experience in the contemporary world is poverty and oppression. Liberation theologians, therefore, are to concern themselves with their liberation from poverty, in the sense of the removal of the cause of oppression.⁶⁸ It is important to note that the way in which Liberation theology addresses these problems can help one in determining its relevance or non-relevance today.

Liberationists' Understanding of Oppression

The American Heritage Dictionary defines oppression in terms of violence and of injustice. According to Elsa Tamez, the word oppression comes from the Hebrew word *Nagash* which means to oppress, exploit, force, exert pressure; when the *lexeme* takes the form of a substantive, it means oppressor, tyrant.⁶⁹ In the context of the Bible, two shades of meaning are provided, 'degrade and force to yield' as seen in Psalm 119:121-122. In the book of Exodus, English translations usually render this noun as 'taskmaster' or 'slave-driver' that dominates, forces into submission or simply oppresses (Exodus 5:6, 10, 14). Since oppression subdues, dominates, humiliates and

⁶⁷ Leonardo Boff, *LiberationTheology, From Confrontation to Dialogue*, trans. Robert Barr (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986); Right Livelihood Award website, <http://www.rightlivelihood.org/recipe/boff.htm> (May 4, 2006), 2.

⁶⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 13.

⁶⁹ Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, 9.

afflicts pain on the oppressed, it is obviously a situation that is neither acceptable nor tolerable, and so a moment comes when the weight of it provokes unrestrained tears, cries of pain, and calls for quick liberation.⁷⁰ Liberation theology regards oppression as sinful. Then, if oppression is equated with idolatry and idolatry with sin, then oppression is necessarily the concrete action that manifests the act of sinful behaviour. Traditional theology defines sin from the point of view of the person or individual. That is to say, sin is anything that is against the character of God. But this falls short of defining structural sin and oppression that stems from economic inequality. While none of the Liberationists explicitly deny the existence of individual sin, their main focus is heavily weighted on structural and institutional sin. They argue that an individual's sin is part of institutional sin. In this regard, sin is equal to corporate or institutional oppression and its remedy or solution, commonly referred to in traditional theology as salvation, can be understood and addressed through a liberative approach. Liberationists also see social or institutional sin as something that has badly affected the society and is still in the process of doing so. Therefore it is another cause or form of oppression that Christian theologians must fight. Liberationists also argue that conversion alone, without practical action, is not enough to fight sin. In this case, societal sin needs to be fought with societal grace. However, it is important to note that salvation/liberation can take many different forms depending on the type of oppression that is being fought. For example, in the case of economic oppression, the creation of jobs, new economic models, redistribution of wealth and land become the main focus, while for ethnic, racism or ethnocentrism, affirmative action may come as a form of salvation or liberation to the needy. Therefore, the message that Liberation theology puts forth is that salvation is liberation from injustice and every form of exploitation that prevents persons from being 'truly human'. Salvation is therefore not confined to personal liberation, but rather liberation from oppression and social inequalities brought on by political and social structures which must be removed.⁷¹

Economic Oppression

As already mentioned, the word oppression stems from the verb 'oppress'. It signifies some form of pain, violence and injustice that is being inflicted on the powerless. In the history of every people there are various things that made the people feel oppressed. It could come in the form of economic exploitation, colonial rule, unfair administrative actions, and unequal power relations.⁷² Thus, the Liberationists look not only at the oppressor and the victim, but also at the structure of a society that leads to any form of oppression. It is commonplace in Liberation theology that economic policy, structures, disparity or gender are seen as the main causes that fuel an oppressive situation. To some, this oppression is equated with idolatry, which the scriptures repeatedly condemn.

⁷⁰Ibid, 15.

⁷¹Ibid, 16.

⁷²Ibid, 22.

By making the link between oppression, economics, and idolatry, the Liberationist gains much support from the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. For example, in the Old Testament the basic Hebrew word that explains and describes this form of oppression is 'ashag'. It means to obtain by violence or force, to extort, and it signifies, among other things, economic exploitation leading to poverty. 'Ashag' is often accompanied by the use of another Hebrew word 'gazel' which means to despoil and rob as used in Ezekiel 18:18; 22:7, and Micah 2:1-2.⁷³ Liberationists believe that economic oppression or exploitation dehumanises the poor and that God does not condone it. Hence, Yahweh speaks of crushing the oppressor, (Job 34:25; Psalm 72:4).

Ethnic, Racial and Cultural Oppression

Dewi Hughes defines culture as empire building or imposing the will of one's ethnic identity on others by force.⁷⁴ Justo Gonzalez aptly recognizes this when he states, "culture is the entire set of values and standards that ruling groups set up in order to authenticate their own power and to keep the rest subservient. Culture develops at the high point of power of a nation or a group".⁷⁵ Furthermore, the political philosophy that has been dominant in Europe since the end of the 18th century justifies the repression of minorities in the interest of state unity and individual freedom. Many writers, such as Samuel Escobar, conclude that in many of the conquered places, such as Africa and Latin America, the conquerors believed that enlarging their territory was synonymous with enlarging the kingdom of God.⁷⁶ Again, Gonzalez observes that a very similar theory exists in the United States where the Kingdom of God is believed to be synonymous with democracy.⁷⁷ In short, culture is the expression of one group claiming superiority over those around it, and while culture can be oppressing, it may also be used to liberate. In the case of the USA, South Africa, Rhodesia and Namibia, where ethnic and racial oppression was perpetrated against the blacks, a Theology of Liberation developed, aimed at making the gospel relevant to oppressed people by denouncing these forms of oppression as evil and idolatry and contrary to the teachings of the Bible. The question that confronted black liberation theologians at the time was, What, if anything, does the Christian gospel have to say to powerless black people? In the words of James Cone, "if the black whose existence is threatened on a daily basis by the insidious tentacles of oppressive white power believes the gospel has nothing to

⁷³Ibid, 23.

⁷⁴Dewi Hughes, *Castrating Culture: A Christian Perspective on Ethnic Identity from the Margins* (Glasgow: Paternoster Press, 2001), 1-2.

⁷⁵Justo Gonzalez, *Manana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 37-38.

⁷⁶Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (*Christian Doctrine in Global Perspective*), ed. David Smith. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 60.

⁷⁷Justo Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching*..., 32.

say to the black people as they confront the daily realities of life, it is a lifeless message. In that case, Christianity would not be real and relevant for blacks. So, they will reject it.”⁷⁸ Cone also argues that for the blacks to develop a relevant theology of liberation they must begin with the person of Jesus, and specifically the Jesus that is revealed in the Gospel of Luke: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18-19). Cone also notes that Jesus’ work was essentially one of liberation. Cone further argues that, in Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his, their despair becomes divine despair. It is therefore evidently clear that Jesus had little tolerance for the middle- or upper-class religious snob whose attitude attempted to usurp the sovereignty of God and destroy the dignity of the poor or other races.⁷⁹ Cone writes, “the kingdom is for the poor and not the rich because, the former has to accept from the world while the latter’s existence is grounded in his commitment to worldly things. The poor man may expect everything from God, while the rich man may expect nothing, because he refuses to free himself from his own pride.”⁸⁰ It is however important to caution that this does not necessarily make poverty a pre-condition for entrance into the Kingdom, but that according to Jesus, those who recognize their utter dependence on God, and wait on him despite the miserable absurdity of life are, typically, the poor. When the poor and the black people hear this message, Cone insists, they discover a message that resonates with their experience of life. Their experience of struggling for liberation and getting out of poverty is the same as the struggle of Christ himself. And if Jesus was resurrected, and is now alive, then, he would be fighting for the very same things and working against the structures of injustice.⁸¹ What is clear from this text, Luke 4:18-19, and many others in Luke, is that Christ is seen by Liberationists as a figure representing struggle, death and freedom even in the 21st century. When fighting racism, Black liberation theologians use Christ the liberator, who is presented in scripture, as their springboard to demand racial equality, freedom and justice. Other sections of the Bible are also used, for example Psalm 10:14: if God is going to see righteousness established in the land, he himself must be particularly active as the helper of the fatherless to deliver the needy when he crieth, and the poor that hath no helper (Psalm 72:12). Charles Waldrop notes that Karl Barth also recognized the legitimacy of this demand, by abstracting the divine nature, human nature, the agent himself, the act which he performs, his being, and action as God and his being, and action as man. Waldrop goes on to say that for this reason, Barth wrote that, “In the relations and events in the life of his people, God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side alone, against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly, against those who

⁷⁸James Hal Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (London: SPCK, 1975), 30.

⁷⁹Ibid, 31.

⁸⁰Ibid, 32.

⁸¹Ibid, 37

already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it.”⁸²

Gender Oppression

At its inception, Liberation theology did not explicitly concern itself with the problem of gender and violence related to it, but rather with economic disparities and class differences. However, the ideology and the methodology of Liberation theology have been applied to feminine issues by scholars such as Ursula King, Rosemary Ruether, Phyllis Trible and Elizabeth Fiorenza. Most of these feminist activists are calling for liberation—freedom from what they call male dominance and a second class status in society. Marxist feminists in particular attempt to locate women’s oppression in social class, race and ethnicity. They challenge the attempt to isolate gender from social class, because they believe that capitalism, patriarchy and sexism are inseparable. Since Liberation theology is deeply rooted in the Catholic belief system, Mary the mother of Jesus is looked upon with exceptionally high regard as being a woman of liberation and an example of how God does not sanction women’s oppression. Mary is seen as an example for others of how God has used women as equal partners. According to Boff, Mary is seen not only as the mother of Jesus, but as being also united with Christ who is in union with the poor and the oppressed. Therefore Mary is on the side of the oppressed and looked up to as a great example of giving faith an opportunity.⁸³ In this regard, Feminist theology has carved a solid niche in Liberation theological discussions. The concerns of feminists have generated discussion around conceptions of God, Christology and eschatology which are all made gender inclusive. For example, God has almost without fail been recognized as being without or beyond gender. Within the Church they have forced a re-evaluation of language in liturgy as well as in patterns of power within society and the church. The forms of scripture, creed, and historical theology are criticised for being male dominated. Of late, feminists have taken a step further with the development of *ecofeminism*. This blend of theology shares a radical feminist critique of male dominated human culture, but observes that the deleterious effects go beyond the human sphere into ecological matters. The damage done to oppress women as a group is paralleled by the damage done to the natural world.⁸⁴ Letty Russell has even argued “that scripture needs liberation, not only from existing interpretations, but also from the patriarchal culture and the bias of the texts themselves, and that in all parts of the Church, many women seek ways of liberating the Word to

⁸²Charles Waldrop, *Karl Barth’s Christology: Its Basic Alexandrian Character*. (Berlin: Mouton Publisher, 1984), 148.

⁸³Leonardo Boff, *LiberationTheology...*, 3.

⁸⁴Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1992), 254-274.

speak the gospel in the midst of the oppressive situations of our time”.⁸⁵ These feminists believe that fresh insights are needed by women to challenge patriarchal domination. All feminists recognise women’s oppression and critique male-dominated institutions, values and beliefs. Therefore, they read the Bible and do theology from a Feminist liberation perspective in an attempt to free themselves from patriarchy. This is a post-colonial discourse which also makes a contextual theology of liberation relevant today.

HIV & AIDS as an Oppressive Disease

The HIV & AIDS crisis poses a new and a serious threat to many people in the African continent. This problem has been compounded by many factors such as poverty, ignorance and in some cases religious beliefs and cultural practices. Recent research also indicates that those who are worst affected are women and the poor people. This is partly so because women have weak or no negotiating power regarding their sexuality. This disempowerment is largely or partially due to their weak economic status. All these factors make HIV & AIDS to be more of a socio-economic problem rather than just a disease or a matter for health professionals, since it affects all aspects of human lives. However, it is important to remember that HIV & AIDS is also a global challenge and as well as an oppressive disease that affects all races, faith communities, genders, nations and continents alike. To give an example, HIV & AIDS impoverishes people by devastating their socio-economic and political livelihoods. In my view the manner in which HIV & AIDS has been oppressive to humanity calls for a holistic and liberation approach when dealing with it. As Tinyiko Maluleke puts it, HIV & AIDS is the *new Kairos* (meaning the right moment for the accomplishment of a crucial action) that challenges every form of theology—inculturation, Black theology, African women’s theology etc.—to integrate it into their theological frameworks.⁸⁶ It is also because of this urgent momentum that the liberation frameworks and methodologies become useful to combat it.⁸⁷ Having this in mind, I would argue that the quest to find the God of liberation in the HIV & AIDS epidemic can and will be futile if it is done from a mere intellectual, spiritual and abstract perspective. I believe that it is only concrete theological frameworks of liberation that can help us to contextualise the goodness or the role of God in the midst of the human suffering brought by HIV & AIDS. Whereas we cannot find HIV & AIDS clearly in the Bible, it is implied in the Bible. For example, themes such as sexuality, incurable diseases such as leprosy, forgiveness, goodness of God in suffering (Gen 1-2, Ezekiel 18: 1-6, Psalms 37 and 73, Rom 1:1ff, Romans, 5:3-

⁸⁵Letty Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 104-31

⁸⁶Tinyiko Maluleke “The Challenge of HIV/AIDS for Theological Education in Africa: Towards an HIV/AIDS Sensitive Curriculum” in *HIV/AIDS as the new site of struggle: Theological, biblical & religious perspective*, eds. Musa Dube & Tinyiko Maluleke in *Missionalia* Vol 29, No 2, (2001), 121.

⁸⁷Ibid, 133.

5) can be used to contextualise the issue of HIV & AIDS in Africa and in the world today. In an article entitled *Doing theology in the era of HIV & AIDS*, I used a historical materialist method to analyse the economic structure and show how material possessions can affect and influence people's relationships such as gender power relations, and how, as result of economic power or weakness, HIV & AIDS becomes a disease of the poor, oppressed and less powerful of society, thus it becomes necessary to adopt and use tools of liberation in fighting it.⁸⁸

How Relevant is Liberation Theology Today?

As we discuss whether Liberation theology as a 'space' and a 'project' is relevant or not, it becomes necessary for us to be more discerning and cautious, but less discriminating, as many different scholars have explicitly written on it. Whereas some writers have argued convincingly that Liberation theology remains relevant today, some have dismissed it as irrelevant. The relevance of Liberation theology in Post-Independent Africa and the world today is determined by how adequately it responds to the historical realities of the sufferings, exclusion, poverty and oppression of some sections of society. In an attempt to answer the above question, one may say the relevance of Liberation theology can also be determined mainly by its profound influence, which is evident not only from the way it has penetrated many countries in all continents, but also through the way in which it has influenced all branches of Christian theology. Since the 1960s, Liberation theology has remained the only sound Christian theoretical basis for social change and empowerment. Not only has this been typified by the emergence of structures such as the Christian base committees, but also by the unprecedented emphasis on the liberative role of Christianity as a religion and academic discourse. This is evident in the writing of several books, among them *The Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Liberation of Theology* by Juan Segundo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, and the *Bible of the oppressed* by Elsa Tamez, devoting themes to Liberation theology as a discourse that presents God as the liberator of the oppressed. In addition, Jon Sobrino wrote that as long as there is suffering, poverty, exclusion and premature death in the world, there will always be need for a theology (whatever its name might be), that poses the kinds of questions presently posed by Liberation theology.⁸⁹ These writings show that national and political independence that does not recognise the ethnic, class, sex, gender and cultural differences of various sections of society will always remains incomplete. In Post-Independent Africa, this phenomenon has made all the more remarkable the call to align the socio-economic and political impact of globalisation, which is uneven and

⁸⁸Moji Ruele "Doing Theology in the Era of HIV/AIDS" in *HIV/AIDS as the new site of struggle: Theological, biblical & religious perspective*, eds. Musa Dube & Tinyiko Maluleke in *Missionalia* Vol 29, No 2, (2001), 161-173.

⁸⁹Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 1993), 17

contradictory, to the Christian ethical and moral teachings of equality. An important question is whether the God of liberation has now ceased to exist, with the coming of political independence to Africa and other former colonies? If the answer to this question is negative, then my understanding concurs with what Liberationists say about God as the liberator who intervenes in human history: with all these problems continuing to haunt the world, I believe that the stage has been set for God's intervention even today to redeem humankind, by way of liberation, from all the shackles of inequality, poverty, hunger, disease and death. This makes the process of liberation and the role of Liberation theology a relevant one even in the 21st century.⁹⁰ In this case, Liberation theology also moves beyond being a tool in the fight for political independence to a 'watch dog' of freedom and liberty in the 21st century. Furthermore, if Christians and theologians still believe that Jesus Christ is present and relevant today, then it makes sense to expect him to continue with his liberative role, on behalf of God, to fight and liberate the oppressed people from all the above-named odds. According to Boff, Liberation theology culminates in a new praxis of the faith that aids human beings in their liberation process.⁹¹ Boff also argues that it is this order of importance that determines the order of relevance.⁹² In other words, whether Liberation theology is relevant or not in Post-independent Africa and the world today depends on freedom or oppression as it responds to the *Kairos* by addressing the problems bedevilling the world today.⁹³ As John Pobee puts it, at times liberation appears very much like a reversal of positions, this time with the oppressed in the saddle and seat of power treating their former oppressors to a dose of their own medicine.⁹⁴ Pobee goes on to argue that that state of affairs will be as immoral as the present racism involving discrimination against blacks. Besides, there is evidence from Third World countries that the very persons who led their compatriots from oppression by foreigners to political freedom, soon become the oppressors of their own people.⁹⁵ As already argued, Liberation theology is shaped by the context of the poor, the oppressed and the diseased who are still part of our world today. The social ills of our context, challenge theologians to tackle those social ills. That is to say, if poverty and oppression continue to reduce

⁹⁰Moji Ruele, "Understanding *God* in Botswana: A Liberation Theologian Perspective" in *God*, BOLESWA Occasional Papers in Theology and Religion Volume 1, Number 9, (2002), eds. J.B.R. Gaie, L.S. Nthoi and J. Stiebert, 85-99.

⁹¹Lenardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*; trans. John Drury, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), p81.

⁹²Ibid, p82.

⁹³*Kairos* comes from the Greek, meaning for the 'proper time or season'. The *Kairos* as a concept represents an attempt to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ within a particular time. It is a response to the call to act. What is perhaps significant about the *Kairos* is its use as an example of Liberation theology, in that it is a reminder to react to certain situations whenever there is a need to do so.

⁹⁴John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 141.

⁹⁵Ibid, 141.

people to lower status, then a theology of hope that articulates the nature of the problem, the time, and the moment of decision, and within which we as Africans and Christians dwell in the world, becomes relevant and timely. Finally, as a way of suggesting how the contemporary challenges validate, or invalidate the relevance of Liberation theology in Post-independent Africa, one may go by what Pobee is saying: that Liberation theology is still needed to liberate and protect those who are being oppressed even in the name of freedom and democracy in Post-Independent Africa and the world today.⁹⁶ For history has shown that the people who were once oppressed are now emerging as oppressors, replacing the former colonial masters in Africa and many parts of the world. This group of elite have now acquired land/wealth at the expense of the weak and are now the oppressors of today. Kwame Bediako accuses these elite, the Church – for having large chunks of land that it is now renting and selling to private entrepreneurs—and the African theologians, in particular, for deserting their theological terrain/trenches and becoming a problem for the people they are supposed to represent and protect.⁹⁷

Conclusion

This chapter by no means exhausts the whole successes and failures of Liberation theology. But it should serve as a useful starting point that any philosophy of liberation cannot be dismissed as irrelevant simply because the war against colonialism has been won, but rather that other forms of oppressions will always call for a process of liberation. Therefore, in conclusion, I want to restate my basic thesis, that poverty and liberation are indivisible. As long as there is poverty in the world liberation will always be necessary. For example, unfair distribution of wealth, land and economic exploitation of the poor in Post-independent Africa and the world make Liberation theology relevant because it interprets the Bible and Christian doctrines through the experiences of those who are affected. Liberation theology also grounds its advocacy for liberation in the understanding of God's plan for human freedom. In view of all the above mentioned factors, Liberation theology remains robust, dynamic and a relevant project in Post-independent Africa and the world, even in the 21st century.

⁹⁶John Pobee, *Toward an Africa Theology*, 23.

⁹⁷Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity-The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Carlisle: Regnum Books, 1999), 117.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Major Themes in Black Theology

Francis C.L. Rakotsoane

Introduction

‘Black Theology refers to an aspect of the rather recent theological genre known as Liberation Theology’.¹ It is the kind of Christian Liberation Theology that is historically associated with the oppressed Black people mainly of USA and South Africa.² It owes its origin to a painful racial situation to which Black people found themselves subjected in different parts of the world on the basis of their skin pigmentation.

Black Theology derives its name from the unique black experience in racist societies upon which it reflects, where one’s human identity is determined by one’s whiteness or blackness. In order to appreciate what is at stake here, it is important to note that the concept “black” in western cultural and religious societies has always had a negative connotation, apart from the fact that Whites tend to be dominant and oppressive towards Blacks. In these societies, the concept “white” has always been understood as positive and good while “black” was negative and bad...Now in situations in which skin colour plays a decisive role and people are divided into white and black, the very blackness of some people is often spontaneously understood to refer to something that is dirty, bad, inferior and shameful, and therefore something which is to be rejected.³

Historical Background and Development

Between 1517 and 1840 it is estimated that twenty million Blacks were captured in Africa and transported to America and other parts of the world, where they were brutally enslaved. It is this enslavement experience of the Blacks and their descendants which

¹S. Maimela, “Black Theology,” in *Initiation into Theology: The Rich Variety of Theology and Hermeneutics*, eds. S. Maimela & Adrio Konig (Pretoria: JL van Schaik, 1998), 111.

²See N. Pityana, “What is Black Consciousness?” in *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, ed. Basil Moore (London: C. Hurst & Co, 1973); J. L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976).

³Maimela, “Black Theology”.... 113.

finally led to the emergence of Black Theology in USA.⁴ In South Africa, Black Theology came into being following the establishment of the apartheid system, which led to the marginalization and exploitation of Blacks by the Whites in that country.⁵

Although James Cone is today considered a leading theologian in Black Theology, there are historically many scholars who have contributed a great deal to its development as an academic discipline. One such theologian is Nat Turner (1800-1831). Turner is considered by many to have been the most notorious slave who ever lived in America. He is said to have sought freedom by force due to his hatred of slavery. He killed about sixty Whites before he himself was captured and hanged in 1831. His efforts marked the beginning of the struggle for Black people's liberation.⁶ It was some time after his death that Black Theology emerged as a formal discipline. Black clergy in many major Christian denominations engaged in a reassessment of the relationship of the Christian church to the black community. Black caucuses developed in the Catholic, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches. The central thrust of these new groups was to redefine the meaning and role of the Church and religion in the lives of the Blacks. Out of this reexamination emerged what is now known as Black Theology.⁷

Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) is another important figure in the development of Black Theology in America. Martin Luther King once described him as the first man to give millions of Blacks a sense of dignity and destiny, and make them feel important as human beings.⁸ One other important figure is Howard Thurman. In his book entitled *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), Thurman compared Blacks' life with that of Jesus who identified with the poor and the minority. He drew many applications for the experience of the Blacks from Jesus' life.

Although he cannot be called a formal participant in the Black Theology Movement, Martin Luther King Junior is another person who contributed immensely to bringing about the passionate commitment of Black Americans to liberation.⁹ Advocating Gandhian nonviolent social change, King believed that "blacks would not only liberate themselves from the necessity of bitterness and the feeling of inferiority toward whites, but would also prick the conscience of whites and liberate them from a feeling of

⁴See W. L. Banks, *The Black Church in the USA*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972).

⁵See S. Maimela, *Modern Trends in Theology* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1990); S. S. Maimela, *Proclaim Freedom to my people* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1987); A. A. Boesak, *Farewell to innocence: A socio-ethical study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976); T. A. Mofokeng, *The crucified among the crossbearers* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1983).

⁶D. Roberts, "Black Theology in the making," *Review and Expositor* 70: 328. (1973)

⁷See C. V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1972).

⁸R. K. Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement: The Institutionalization of a Black Civil Religion* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1978).

⁹J. H. Cone, "Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Theology—Black Church", *Theology Today* 40:409-420. (1984).

superiority".¹⁰ Albert Cleage is another great writer. In his publication *The Black Messiah*, a collection of sermons, he rejected the Pauline books in the New Testament. He contrasted the "Black Messiah" with what he referred to as a spiritualized Jesus constructed by Paul, whose teaching was modified to conform to the pagan philosophers of the white Gentiles. He taught that Black Christians suffering oppression in a white man's land did not need the individualistic and other-worldly doctrines of Paul and the white man.¹¹ In Southern Africa, important figures in the development of Black Liberation Theology include Maimela (1987), Mosala (1989), Mofokeng (1983), Motlhabi (1984), and Boesak (1977).

Points of Departure and Focus

As is the case with all disciplines and theologies, Black Theology has its own points of departure and focus, which distinguish it from other related theologies. Like all other liberation theologies, it focuses on those who are oppressed and/or poor and addresses itself to white racism, classism, and imperialism (and all their effects) directed at Black peoples, in order to bring about their liberation.

Black theology is limited in scope, comprising only a few of those areas found in the theological expression of the West. The theology of Western Christendom was developed in the midst of and in response to great controversies. Similarly Black Theology has emerged from the field of struggle and seeks to concern itself with issues with which it must contend on a daily basis.¹²

It shares much in common with Liberation Theology in general, but also has its own uniqueness. As a theology of liberation, Black Theology is concerned with the political and economic aspects of salvation rather than salvation in a spiritual sense. Furthermore, God is viewed as being primarily for the poor in society.

Black Theology logically proceeds from Black experience as compared to the biblical truth that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). All are of one human race, varying only ethnically due to cultural influence, but remaining all equally human in nature/substance. It uses the above biblical truth to argue for the unjustifiability of White supremacy and dominance over Black people, and works for Black peoples' liberation from oppression, exploitation, marginalization and discrimination through reflection on the word of God.¹³ It attempts to discern and proclaim God's presence in liberating those who suffer under various forms of artificially created oppressive attitudes and conditions.

¹⁰J. H. Cone, "Black Theology in American Religion" *Theology Today* 43: 13. (1986).

¹¹ See A. B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969).

¹²H. W. House, "An investigation of Black Liberation Theology", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (April-June 1982): 159.

¹³See S. Maimela, *Proclaim Freedom...*; J. I. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); T.A. Mofokeng, *The crucified among the crossbearers...*; M. Motlhabi, "Black Theology: A Personal view" in *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, pp. 77-78, 1973; and Boesak, 1976.

As stated before, Black Theology is not interested in Western discussions about God. Black theologians believe questions about God's essence and attributes are fruitless. Instead, it is concerned with discovering a God who will involve Himself in the black experience and deliver them. Its proponents believe that Black people have heard enough about God. What they want to know is what God has to say about the black condition. Or, more importantly, what is he doing about it? What is his relevance in the struggle against the forces of evil which seek to destroy black being? These are the questions which shape the character of the norm of Black Theology.¹⁴

Major Themes in Black Theology

James Cone is generally identified as a dominant figure in the development of Black Theology and a prolific writer on the subject. Next in importance to him is Deotis Roberts who has also contributed immensely on themes of Black Theology. As a result, the themes usually discussed in Black Theology are mainly those espoused by these two authors. They include: Theology of Man, God, Jesus Christ, Salvation, the Church, Eschatology, Revolution and Violence. To this list may be added many other undesirable human experiences identified with Black people in general. Such experiences include identity crisis, poverty and unemployment, AIDS pandemic and political instability.

However, in the interest of space and time this chapter will cover only a selection of these themes.

Theology of Man

Due to historical and present-day attempts to undermine and destroy the humanity of Black people, Roberts argues that it is necessary to begin the theological enterprise by declaring the absolute dignity and sacredness of every person. Accordingly, the sanctity and dignity of every person, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or class, should be acknowledged. Human dignity is fundamental to creation. Black dignity is God-given and therefore sacred.¹⁵

Expressing similar views about every person's worth, Cone argues that not everybody understands man in this way.

Actually, only the oppressed know what man is because they have encountered both the depravity of human behavior from the oppressors and also the healing powers as revealed in the Oppressed One. Having experienced the brutality of human pride, they will speak less of man's goodness; but also having encountered the meaning of liberation, they can and must speak of human worth as revealed in the black community itself affirming its blackness.¹⁶

¹⁴H. W. House, "An investigation....", 159.

¹⁵See D. E. Goatley, *Black Religion, Black Theology: The Collected Essays of J. Deotis Roberts* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003).

¹⁶J. H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J. B Lippincott, 1970), 159.

On the essential understanding of man, Cone is of the view that being human consists in being free. To be man is to be free and oppose every form of oppression. One is truly free when he or she defines his or her being's meaning in terms of the oppressed of the land, by fighting for their liberation from every form of oppression.¹⁷ Freedom is liberation. Therefore where there is no liberation there is no freedom. Being free means risking everything in the name of liberation from oppression in all its forms and manifestations.

What Cone has just expressed above has been seen by some scholars as turning Black Theology into a separatist Theology. That is, a theology that is meant to separate races or treat them separately and which can therefore not apply universally to all humankind. Expressing his frustration about this, Holmer says:

I was told that I "must" be threatened by it, for being white, I could be nothing else, that it was "black" and could only be understood by blacks and that they were the only jury; that it all had to do with black revolution and that revolution was its touchstone as well as the one thing needful. I began to hear that there was black logic, a black experience and a black morality. When all of that was put together with talk of a black Virgin and a black God, there was the strong temptation to let it all slip by as a kind of intellectual wantonness.¹⁸

A closer look at what Cone and other Black theologians are saying here reveals that what is being said is not so much the issue of treating the Black people as being different from the rest of humankind. The point they are making is that the essence of our humanity (regardless of whether we are Black or White) lies in being of service to our fellow human beings and being ready to abandon our comfort zones in the name of that service each time a need to do so arises.

God

God is conceived of as a personal being who shares the suffering of the oppressed. He knows each person intimately. He is concerned to know and respond accordingly to all that happens to humanity in the world.¹⁹ Human beings and God can share fellowship by virtue of the mystery of relationality because God is experienced as the source of humanizing relationships of love, truth and justice, of mercy and kindness. Humans are understood not to have the ground of their being in themselves, but in God.²⁰ In Black Theology God is seen as both love and freedom. This means that He loves and calls humanity from oppression into wholeness of life. He is the wholeness which exists in the spaces between people when their dignity and worth is mutually affirmed in love, truth, honesty, justice, and caring warmth.²¹

¹⁷J. H. Cone, *A Black Theology...*, 160.

¹⁸P. Holmer, "About Black Theology", *The Lutheran Quarterly* 28:232.

¹⁹D. E. Goatley, *Black Religion...*2003.

²⁰D. E. Goatley, *Black Religion...*2003.

²¹N. Pityana, "What is Black Consciousness?" 1973.

In Black Theology's understanding, God is not an abstract and passive entity with no immediate concern for humanity's wellbeing, but is a God who is just and is opposed to any form of oppression of one human race by another. Black theologians want to see the goodness of God here in the land of the living, for that is what establishes the presence of God among human beings. They are not interested in arguments about the person of God, the Trinity, His supreme power and authority etc. Instead, they are only concerned about discovering a God who will involve Himself in their experience of rejection and marginalization and deliver them from oppression in all its forms. Concepts such as 'God is love' or 'God is freedom' have more meaning for and are more acceptable to the oppressed masses of Black people. Thus Black Theology seeks to address 'this-world' problems, rather than 'other-world' issues; concrete circumstances, rather than abstract and speculative thought; the sinfulness of man's plight in a ghetto rather than sin in man's heart; and to speak to a savior who delivers man from earthly slavery, rather than a Savior who saves man from spiritual bondage only.

Identity

Due to the Black experience spoken of earlier in this work, being Black is no longer something some Africans are proud of. For many, being Black is perceived as being the porter of all humanity's pain and suffering. When we talk of Africans, the question that comes to one's mind immediately is, 'who is an African?' A lot has been said in reply to this question. Generally speaking, the word 'African' can be used in two senses. In the first case, the word may be used to refer to all people living in Africa as their home continent. Used in this general sense, the word applies to people of all races living in Africa as their home, regardless of their skin pigmentation, origin or style of life. The second sense in which the word is used is when it refers to people considered to be the original inhabitants of Africa who, regardless of which part of the globe they now live in, always consider themselves as being of African ancestry, whether or not born and/or bred in Africa and who share in common both physical features and a life worldview.

It is in this latter sense that the word 'African' has been used in this chapter. In so far as physical features are concerned, Africans are generally classified as belonging to the Negroid race, one of the three races of humankind.²² The other two are the Caucasoid (consisting of Whites and Indians only), and the Mongoloid (Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, natives of America, etc). The Negroid race is characterized by woolly hair, black, dark-brown or even yellow skin and many other secondary physical features such as, for example, a flat-topped nose with wide open nostrils, thick lips and a big back which make them better adapted than the other two races for African climatic conditions. These are features which are often scoffed at by some Non-Africans who out of ignorance have associated them with being cursed, being in the process of becoming fully human and being incapable of controlling one's sex drive.

²²See R. L. Beals and H. Hoijer, *An Introduction to Anthropology*, Fourth Edition (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973).

These African features exist for a God-given purpose. Africa is a hot continent with, at times, harmful radiation from the sun. For Africans to be able to survive such radiation there is a need to have enough protective melanin – a skin pigmentation known to naturally protect the skin from radiation. Only dark skins have this pigmentation in adequate amounts. For this reason God, who has placed Africans in Africa, out of love has given them a dark skin, not as a curse, but as a blessing for them to survive and enjoy life in Africa. A flat-topped nose with wide open nostrils functions like a fan as it allows the free flow of air in and out of the African body. That free movement of huge volumes of air creates a cooling effect. A sharp nose with narrow nostrils is not ideal for African climatic conditions because it traps the heat inside and does not allow enough cool air to enter the body. Such a nose is only ideal in cold climatic conditions where people need heat in order to keep warm.

This explains why people living in the coldest regions of the Earth have the sharpest noses and palest skins. Likewise, African thick lips and protuberant big backs provide enough surface area for adequate radiation of heat from the body. The heat gets lost in the form of sweat. Evaporation of the sweat from this big surface area creates a cooling effect for the body. The explanation given above is supported by the fact that when it is really hot and the body no longer has enough water, human beings feel dryness of their lips as a sign that they have lost water. This is because bodily parts such as these are relatively more porous than other parts of the body. The same reasoning may be given for African short and woolly hair. This kind of hair leaves a lot of head skin uncovered if it is left in its natural state (uncombed). In this way radiation of heat from the skin takes place freely without any pockets of air acting as insulators against the heat loss. This explains why people living in cold parts of the world have long hair that looks more like mohair than wool. Such hair traps pockets of air whose function is to insulate against heat loss from the head.

Those who have failed to understand these God-given African features have attached to them all sorts of theories, many of which have made some Africans feel ashamed of their African-ness. These same people have subjected Africans to all sorts of indignities designed to destroy their self-esteem and turn them into mere self-ashamed junk on earth.

For such snobs as Hegel, who could not control his arrogance, an African was natural man in his savage state, with an untamable nature.²³ He was classified as a creature degraded by nature, reliant on instinct, more akin to animals (a handsome beast, at best) - only good enough to serve white folk.²⁴ For him, if one wished to understand an African one would have to bypass respect, all morality or, generally, any human feeling, because for him, in Africans there was no trace of humanity. They knew only of sorcery, witchcraft, magic and fetishism, devoid of any conception of God or morality grounded in religion.

²³B. Bujo, *African Theology in its social context* (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications-Africa, 1992), 48.

²⁴D. Ogrizek, *South and Central Africa* (London: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Ltd, 1954), 31.

For generations, Africa was presented to the outside world by her ruthless invaders as the 'dark continent' inhabited by savages, intellectually lacking, unchristian and morally uncivilized. Hence, the Africans outside Africa could hardly be blamed for not wanting to be reminded of, or associated with, Mother Africa. The story of the 'history' of their forefathers was more than they could stomach!²⁵

In order to prove to the Western World that Africans were not really human or, at best, not fully human, some African ladies were abducted to Europe where they were forced to expose their nakedness in circuses as a form of entertainment to white audiences, who ignored the moral implications of this. It is no secret that even today some European museums continue to display human parts mutilated from early African victims of slavery and colonialism, for public viewing, in order to make money. We remember with sadness what happened to Baartman. 'After her death, in December 1815, she was dissected and her genitalia, along with her brain, became a prized exhibit at the Musée'.²⁶

In the light of the foregoing, the task in Black Theology is to revive Africans' self-esteem and restore their pride and dignity as black people. It is to declare that blackness is a gift from God about which they need not feel ashamed or apologize and 'to say that to be black has nothing to do with being a non-person, a person without a history or culture worth knowing about'.²⁷ Black Theology portrays a true African image and thus helps other racial groups understand, appreciate and respect Africans as human beings with the understanding that they, like the rest of humankind, have been created by God on purpose, not by accident.

Jesus Christ

In Black Theology, God sides with the oppressed and Jesus is looked to as the liberator who frees those who are oppressed, for life in this world, or delivers them from their toil in this world by freeing them into the next. But such liberation of the oppressed should be oriented towards this life and not be merely an escape from the present dilemma to peace in a heavenly afterlife.²⁸ Christ is seen as black because he identifies himself with the oppressed, and those oppressed are the Black people. His message is thus seen as black power. The black power is meant to bring about the creation of a new order, a new community, which is, for the oppressed masses of Black people, a transition from non-being to being; and the church, as the instrument of Christ, has to bring about this desired situation, which is seen as the will of God, through preaching, service and fellowship.

It is here, in the union of black power with the mission of Christ, that problems begin to arise. The question some people ask is: Does Jesus, as liberator, come to

²⁵M. Nangoli, *No more Lies About Africa* (New Jersey: African Heritage Publishers, 1978), 6.

²⁶*Sunday Times*, October 18, 1998, 29.

²⁷S. Maimela, *Modern Trends*...., 193.

²⁸J. H. Cone, *A Black Theology*....1970.

deliver the mind or the body or both, of the oppressed? To answer this question, Cone affirms the latter and goes on to say:

It is my thesis...that Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forbearance. It is, rather, Christ's central message to twentieth-century America.²⁹

Cone further berates those in the church who seem to urge those oppressed to seek deliverance from white oppression in the afterlife and to tolerate it for the present. For Cone, Black Theology should never embrace any theology which attempts to portray the suffering of the Black people as the will of God.³⁰

Jesus is perceived in a more political way. He is a Liberator; but more than that, He is seen as a "black Messiah" whose life and work of emancipating the poor and rejected of society parallels the black attempt at liberation. This way of perceiving Jesus is, for example, found in Hilliard's statement to evangelical leaders when he wrote that "Jesus stood with and for the poor and oppressed and disinherited. He came for the sick and needy.... He came into the world as the ultimate 'nigger' of the universe".³¹

The essence of Christ's message is seen as found in the Gospel of St. Luke: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favourable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

In Black theology, Jesus is seen as one who stands on the side of the oppressed Blacks and is one with them, over against the oppressor. He is the example for revolt against the oppressive conditions in which many Black people find themselves victims. He is thus seen more in political than spiritual terms.

Salvation

In Black Theology, salvation is regarded as deliverance of the oppressed from the oppressor. God in his righteousness is concerned about the servitude of the helpless and the poor (in this case referring to the Blacks) and delivers them. He delivers them not from their individual personal sin, but from the dominating forces in society, which constitute a collective sin of the oppressors against the oppressed. As Mpunzi puts it, "Black Theology has no room for the traditional Christian pessimistic view of man, the view that we are all by nature overwhelmingly and sinfully selfish".³² Instead, sin and salvation are both seen as being on the vertical plane and relating to acts of and for freedom from oppression.

²⁹J. H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 1.

³⁰J. H. Cone, *A Black Theology...* 1970.

³¹www.nppn.org/funky/%20Jesus.pdf.

³²A. Mpunzi, "Black Theology as Liberation Theology" in *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, 137.

The freedom spoken of here is not freedom about doing what one will, but becoming what one should. One is considered free when one sees clearly the fulfillment of his/her being and is thus capable of making the envisioned self a reality.³³ It is the kind of freedom that is holistic by nature. It is about the whole self, not just the soul. In it, man is seen not in dualistic terms, but as a complete whole, confronted by a complete situation.

The goal towards which freedom from oppression should lead is not another world reality. Another life in heaven is not the concern here. The goal should be to help the oppressed to enjoy and determine their lives now, in this life. Expressing this understanding of the freedom of the oppressed from their oppressors, Cone once said:

‘If eschatology means that one believes that God is totally uninvolved in the suffering of men because he is preparing them for another world, then Black Theology is not eschatological. Black Theology is an earthly theology!’³⁴

As can be seen from the foregoing discussion, in Black Theology, salvation does not refer to the freedom from the sinful nature and acts of each individual person, but refers to physical liberation of the oppressed from their oppressors in this life, not in any envisioned life to come. An appeal to heaven is seen as an attempt to dissuade those oppressed from the goal of real liberation of their whole persons.

Conclusion

The focal concern or heart of Black Theology is the fact of oppression, along with its concomitant indignities, experienced by the Blacks in various parts of the world. Therefore the usual abstract theological discussions about God, Christ, and salvation are considered irrelevant insofar as they do not relate to the undesirable experience of the Blacks in this world.

Black Theology has made valuable contributions to theological discussion today. Its most outstanding contribution is the holistic nature of salvation which it is trying to portray. In contrast to the dominant Greek view of reality found in traditional theology, which paid very little attention to the physical nature of man but put undue emphasis on the spirit, Black Theology acknowledges a unity of man’s being and man’s ultimate physical deliverance. In Black Theology, God works in His people in real-life situations where they are affected both spiritually and physically.

The kingdom which Jesus preached and represented through his existence is not only the soul’s bliss but shalom for the body as well: peace on earth and liberation of the creature from the past. If, however, the body belongs to the Lord (I Cor. 6:13b, 15, 19), the task of the Christian is to await and anticipate His dominion in the future redemption of his body. This is not just Christian *charitas*, but a practical proof of hope in the redemption of the body.³⁵

³³J. H. Cone, *Black Theology*....1969.

³⁴J. H. Cone, *Black Theology*..., 123.

³⁵J. Moltmann, “Toward a Political Hermeneutics of the Gospel”, in *New Theology*, No.6, eds. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman, (New York: Macmillan Co. 1969), 87.

Another important contribution of Black Theology is that it has brought to the attention of the Christian Church in general the fact that other members of this body of Christ are hurting, and are in poverty, disease, and physical want. It reminds them what their Scripture plainly teaches: there should be no division in the body, but its parts should have equal concern for each other (1 Cor. 12:25). To speak great words of wisdom and knowledge but without practical expression of it (love) is to be like a noisy gong (1 Cor. 13:1). Thus Black Theology challenges fellow Christians, especially those who appear to be part of the problem, to address themselves to the plight of Black Christian communities and attempt to empathetically and practically become part of the solution and help them in their endeavour to assuage their predicament, for the Scripture teaches that "if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor. 12:26).

As there is no wall without two sides, Black Theology has not been spared criticism. One of the main criticisms against it has to do with its very name, "Black Theology". Some theologians have raised their concern that by the phrase "Black Theology," the impression is created that the theology offered by Black Theologians differs from that offered by other theologians.

Black Theology is also seen by others as having a very narrow theological centre as a result of what some people see as its reliance on Black experience rather than Christ as the norm for truth. It is also considered to be too humanistic and pragmatic due to its worldly view of salvation and its overwhelming emphasis on the Black man which tends to make man the measure of all things. To broaden the scope of Black Theology, House suggests that Black Theologians must not look within, to their own experiences, but outside themselves, to find the answer to their problems.³⁶ Perhaps, to strike a balance between Black Theology as it is perceived now, and mainstream theology, all theology should be geared to bringing about a church that is committed to the Scriptures and to Christ, so that to the members of that church the name "Christian" may truly be descriptive of who they are, and not of the color of their skin.

³⁶H. W. House, "An investigation.....", 159.

CHAPTER TWELVE

What's in a Name?

Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies¹

Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar

Introduction

Feminism has become the shorthand for the proclamation that women's experiences should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of being a human. It highlights the woman's world and her worldview as she struggles side by side with the man to realize her full potential as a human being ... Feminism then emphasizes the wholeness of the community as made up of male and female beings. It seeks to express what is not so obvious, that is, that male-humanity is a partner with female-humanity, and that both expressions of humanity are needed to shape a balanced community within which each will experience a fullness of Be-ing [*sic*]. Feminism calls for the incorporation of the woman into the community of interpretation of what it means to be human.²

If the above definition of feminism as provided by Mercy Oduyoye proves to be true, then we scholars who belong to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theolo-

¹This article is a development of two earlier articles dealing with this issue: I. A. Phiri and S. Nadar, *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, ed. I. A. Phiri and S. Nadar. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 1-6; and I. A. Phiri, "The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians: Its Contribution to Ecumenical Formation". *The Ecumenical Review* 57/1 (2005): 34-41. Both articles engage the issue of naming our liberation theology, albeit on a superficial level as this was not the main issue in those articles.

²M. A. Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986), 121.

gians³ should have no problem calling ourselves feminist. Yet, Circle theologians, especially from the Anglophone region, have been reluctant to explicitly name our work feminist.⁴ Called to discuss models of engendering theological education in July 2004, a robust and spirited debate ensued among Circle theologians as to whether we should name ourselves feminist or not. The discussion, though heated at times, nevertheless highlighted our need as African women theologians to continue the struggle to broaden the theoretical basis of our work. Although many of us were trained in the tools of Western theologies, we have yet to systematically and theoretically interrogate them as to their meaningfulness within our context as African women. Coupled with this, we as African women saw the need to establish ourselves differently (although with similar agendas) from the feminist cause which we perceive as being largely Western, white and middle-class. On the other hand, Isabel Phiri has argued that:

Despite the differences in terminology, all women would like to see the end of sexism in their lives and the establishment of a more just society of men and women that seek the well-being of the other. The women go further to seek justice for all the oppressed including the environment.⁵

Our aim in this paper is to explore the rationale behind the differences in the terminology used within feminist theologies, particularly that of African women's theologies, highlighting in each case the positive and negative aspects of each feature. The paper concludes with a call for African women's theologies to be recognized as an authentic discipline in and of itself within the study of theology, while at the same time recog-

³The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (*hereafter*, the Circle) was inaugurated in 1989. By 2006, the Circle had a registered membership of 617 members on the African continent and in the Diaspora, distributed as follows: 465 Anglophone, 93 Francophone, and 59 Lusophone members. The criterion for membership is a commitment to research, write and publish on issues affecting African women and women of African descent. The Circle is an important space for women from Africa to do communal theology based on their religious, cultural and social experiences. It draws its membership from women of diverse backgrounds, nationalities, cultures and religions rooted in African Indigenous Religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism. It encompasses indigenous African women and seeks to relate to African women of American, Asiatic, and European origins. As concerned women, the Circle is continuously engaged in theological dialogue with cultures, religions, sacred writings and oral stories that shape the African context and define the women of the African continent. Whilst its mission is to undertake research, writing and publishing on African issues from women's perspectives, the central vision of the Circle is to empower African women to contribute critical thinking and analysis towards the advancement of human knowledge. Theology, religion and culture are the three chosen foci used as the framework for all Circle research and publications.

⁴Scholars from Francophone Africa have been less reluctant to name their work as feminist.

⁵I. A. Phiri, "Contextual Theologies in Southern Africa," in *Introduction to Third World Theologies*, ed. J. Parrat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 156.

nizing the pervasive inter-disciplinary nature of African women's theologies as one of its strengths.

Why All the Fuss about Naming?

The chief cornerstone of feminist theological discourse lies in experience. As a result, feminist theologians have always maintained experience as a legitimate starting-point of any research.⁶ Ironically, it is on this issue of experience that African, Asian, African-American, and Latin American women felt the need to name their theologies differently. As Young⁷ explains, one can make an argument for certain universal experiences of women, "but whatever these in their immediacy, the articulation and understanding of them change as factors such as culture, gender, race and class, mould one's expectations and reflections." African American women have thus argued that their experiences of race and class discrimination, particularly as experienced through their history of slavery and colonialism, has not been fully addressed by feminism which tends to focus more on gender than upon race and class.⁸

Other "women of colour" soon began to realize the interconnectivity of different oppressions. Hence it was the Indian scholar Chandra Mohanty who reminded First World feminists that "beyond sisterhood there is racism, colonialism and imperialism".⁹ Childers and Hooks went on to rightly argue that as contexts define our identities, our race and class must of necessity be specified:

Even if it means continuously using extra adjectives as in poor Latinos, black middle-class women, white working-class women, it is worth it so that people don't feel excluded or robbed of an ability to identify with the category 'women' because they feel appropriated rather than addressed by feminism¹⁰

In other words, although there are similarities between the oppressions that women experience, it would be a hegemonic move to universalise their oppression. As Palkar further argues:

Western feminists tend to universalise patriarchy and thereby homogenize women, especially the Third World women ... but the problems and the subjectivities may differ according to their national, historical or local contexts. The ideological construction of

⁶P. D. Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology in Search of Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 49-69; R. R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 12-46.

⁷*Ibid.*, 51

⁸D. S. Williams, *Sisters in the wilderness: the challenge of womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), ix-xvi.

⁹Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses," in *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 7.

¹⁰M. Childers & B. Hooks, "A Conversation about Race and Class," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. M. Hirsch and E. F. Keller (London: Routledge, 1990), 27.

women in India, say, is not the same as that of a woman in Argentina though both of them are supposed to belong to the Third World.¹¹

The fuss about naming therefore comes about from the need, we submit, to avoid what Chandra Mohanty¹² calls the “third world difference – that stable, a-historical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these [Third-world] countries.” It is to recognize that if experience is to be the cornerstone of our feminist theologizing and feminist research then the specificity and location of experience has to be taken into consideration. In what is now popularly known as ‘third wave of feminism,’ experience is more than ever being taken seriously as women from the two-Thirds World¹³ are beginning to make their voices heard whether through post-colonial discourse, cultural hermeneutics or Marxist-feminist critique. The point that gender is linked closely with the issue of race (as can be seen in the work of womanist scholars such as Delores Williams¹⁴ by class (typified particularly in the work of Latin-American scholars such as Ivone Gebara¹⁵ or by inter-faith encounter (as can be seen in the work of some Asian feminist scholars),¹⁶ and culture (as typified in the work of some Asian feminist scholars),¹⁷ has never been more forcefully asserted than at the present time. Even in Africa, it is impossible to universalise African women’s experiences. A case in point would be within the South African context, where the experiences of White women have been markedly different from those of their Black counterparts.¹⁸

Given the strong argument for the specificity of experience, it is important to state at this point the specificity of our own experiences. Unfortunately, it would be

¹¹S. Palkar, “Feminist Literary Theory: Creating New Maps,” in *Women’s Writing: Text and Context*, ed. J. Jain (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1996), 20–21.

¹²Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 63.

¹³Our choice to use the term “Two-Thirds World” as opposed to “Third World” is deliberate; we take issue with the way in which the term “Third World” is used to denigrate the African continent and thereby make the First World the norm and standard by which the rest of the world is judged.

¹⁴D. S. Williams, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, ed. U. King (London: SPCK, 1994), 7–87.

¹⁵Ivone Gebara, “Women Doing Theology in Latin America,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, ed. U. King (London: SPCK, 1994), 47–59.

¹⁶Pui-Lan Kwok, “The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, ed. U. King (London: SPCK, 1994), 63–76.

¹⁷M. A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 9–38.

¹⁸See D. Ackermann, “Participation and Inclusiveness Among Women,” in *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, ed. M. Kanyoro and N. Njoroge (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996), where this has been discussed in detail.

impossible to tell our entire stories (parts of which have been told elsewhere).¹⁹ Rather, what we want to highlight here is the significance of our gender struggles towards the kind of research we undertake. We each come from different backgrounds. Isabel Phiri is a Chewa from Malawi, a Presbyterian, living and working as an academic in South Africa. Her present location in South Africa can largely be attributed to her struggles as a feminist, both in her church and university context in Malawi, where she was violently barred from the church and the University for raising issues of gender justice in church and society.²⁰

Sarojini Nadar is a fourth generation South African Indian woman. Having grown up in a low socio-economic Pentecostal church in the racially-segregated 'Indian' dormitory township of Phoenix, north of the coastal city of Durban, during the time of apartheid, she now belongs to a Lutheran church in Chatsworth, also a previously-designated 'Indian' township, south of Durban, which, as with Phoenix, remains predominantly Indian. The move from a Pentecostal to a Lutheran church has not changed the gender struggles she experiences almost daily with patriarchal theology deeply entrenched in the so-called 'Indian' church. The hardships she experienced in a patriarchal society after the death of her father, and her subsequent sexual abuse as a child, are what primarily drive her feminist agenda, finding solidarity with those who suffer similar fates. It is for this reason that she identifies herself as a feminist²¹ struggling to understand, analyse and change the system of domination and abuse of power.

Both authors of this article are committed to the struggle for gender justice through the Programme of Gender and Religion, in which we both teach at the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The fact that both of us are in positions of relative privilege, due in part to our education and economic standing, mean that our theologizing will always be influenced by such factors. Nevertheless, we consider ourselves "activist-intellectuals"²² through our involvement with organizations such as the Centre for Constructive Theology,²³ our churches, and in

¹⁹See I. Phiri, "Stand Up To Be Counted: Identity, Spirituality and Theological Education in My Journey of Faith," in D. Ackermann et al., *Claiming Our Footprints: South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality* (Stellenbosch: EFSA Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000), 145-160; see also S. Nadar, "Emerging From Muddy Waters," *ibid.*

²⁰See I. Phiri, "Marching, Suspended and Stoned," in *God, People and Power in Malawi: Democratization in Theological Perspective*, ed. K. R. Ross (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996), 63-105.

²¹In her doctoral work (2003), Nadar chooses the African-American term "womanist", arguing that womanism, rather than feminism, addresses the pervasive realities of race and class.

²²B. G. Haddad, "African Women's Theologies of Survival: Intersecting faith, Feminisms, and Development" (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, 2000), 25.

²³See "Empowerment of Women Through the Centre for Constructive Theology," in *International Review of Mission* LXXXIX/354, 2000: 329-337.

most recent times with multi-national corporations who invite us to conduct workshops on issues of gender, culture and HIV/AIDS. Together, we have also conducted Bible study workshops with churches, with the constant aim of raising awareness of gender justice and ultimately to transform patriarchy, which is endemically present both in our churches and society. Additionally, we work closely with the communities wherein we both work and live: the municipal areas of eThekweni (Durban) and Msunduzi (Pietermaritzburg), in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal. True to feminist ideals, we see our task as not just the intellectual one but the activist one as well.

Having raised the issues surrounding the debates around naming feminist work, and having situated ourselves in the context of our identities, we want to move towards enunciating the processes of such naming, utilizing the theories and methodologies developed by scholars from within the Circle, in what has been generally called “African Women’s Theologies.”

Features Of African Women’s Theologies

In her book, “Introducing African Women’s Theology”²⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the Ghanaian theologian and founder of the Circle, enumerates a number of important characteristics that distinguish African women’s theologies from other contextual theologies. She firstly suggests that:

though their [African women’s] theological heritage is made up of European and American theologies of various types, including missionary and feminist/womanist theologies, African women take a critical distance from them, as their priority is to communicate African women’s own understanding.²⁵

In what follows, by delineating seven key features of African women’s theologies, we propose to explore how African women theologians have developed their own theological understanding.

Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics

One of the primary defining features of African women’s theologies is its focus on culture as a source of theology. Such focus is of course in continuity with African male theologians who also focus on culture as a way of redeeming African identity and culture, which has often been demonized by an aggressive Christian missionary agenda

²⁴M. A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theologies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001),

²⁵Oduyoye clarifies that while African women may not always share the agenda of Western feminists with regard to, for example, the issue of inclusive language, “the traditional missionary perspective that Christianity is unqualified good news for Africa prevails in most of their writings” (2001:15).

to evangelise Africa.²⁶ For African women theologians, however, their experiences of African males are often taken as the norm and standard. What is now popularly known in such alliances as the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) as an “irruption within an irruption” only took place when African women began to make a strong case for their experiences to be included in the discourses of African Theology and African Christianity. As a result, “women are developing cultural hermeneutics for the appropriation of Africa’s religio-culture, which constitutes a resource for envisioning the will of God and the meaning of women’s humanity”²⁷ By so doing, feminist cultural hermeneutics has sought to face the “challenge of struggling with one’s culture, while fencing off those waiting to use our culture to under-rate us. Cultural hermeneutics seeks a critique from within and not an imposition from without”.²⁸ The issues upon which African women theologians have focused, utilizing the tools of analysis of feminist cultural hermeneutics, have been broad and varied. Although the term ‘hermeneutic’ is usually reserved for the discipline of biblical studies, the way in which it is often used within feminist cultural hermeneutics, as one of the methods developed by African women theologians, is as a tool by which to interrogate both the biblical practices of culture and the varied cultures extant within Africa.

As a reaction to the inculturation project proposed by our African brother in the biblical studies discipline and in the broader context, perhaps, of the Black consciousness movement and its call towards Black people to be proud of their Blackness, their cultures and their heritage, Musimbi Kanyoro has proffered her own version of a feminist cultural hermeneutics. She responds seriously, but not uncritically to the call. Put simply, “Kanyoro suggests that women read the Scriptures in dialogue with their own cultural understanding and become critical of the intersections between them”²⁹

Feminist cultural hermeneutics has therefore been used as a tool to analyse a variety of issues within African culture, including that of sexuality. Although sexuality has been widely engaged in feminist discourse in the West, it is usually discussed in the context of sexual orientation and reproductive rights. In contrast, amongst African women theologians, such issues are discussed in the context of rites of passage, including childbirth (women’s sexuality in the context of giving birth), menstruation (purity and impurity laws), circumcision (male and female), marriage (the patriarchal constraints within marriage and the different forms of marriage), and even death (practices such as widow-cleansing etc).³⁰ In order to correctly analyse these issues it is

²⁶See J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969) ; see also J. N. Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi: Acton, 2002).

²⁷Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theologies*, 18.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2004), 166.

³⁰See Oduyoye and Kanyoro, *The Will To Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, ed. Oduyoye and Kanyoro (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2006), where such rites of passage are dealt with in detail.

not possible to use general and abstract theories which do not apply to the specificity of such cultural practices. African women theologians are therefore careful to always specify concrete contexts in their writings, instead of making generalizations towards the whole of Africa. The tool of feminist cultural hermeneutics helps us to do this.

A good example of this can be found in the work of the black South African biblical scholar, Madipoane Masenya, who has trail-blazed an approach towards interpreting the Bible which she has named *bosadi*. Masenya aims to read the Bible from the perspective of specific Northern–Sotho cultural sensibilities of womanhood. Using the term *bosadi* in this manner does not convey much in and of itself; Masenya, however, defines the term in a new way. She explains her methodology as being an “African women’s liberation” model which seeks to highlight the oppressive elements in African culture and the biblical culture while retrieving the liberative elements in both these cultures. She also asserts that this model of hermeneutics highlights the values of *ubuntu* (‘I am because we are’) and family. Her context as a South African scholar also compels her to include the interplay of post-apartheid, racism, sexism, classism and African culture in her hermeneutical model.³¹ Masenya’s work has been criticized for almost excusing oppressive elements of culture, in her attempt at inculturation.³² Her desire to move away from a Western model of theologizing to a more African one can be seen in the way in which she charts a shift from naming her work originally as Black feminist theology within feminist theology, later as African womanist hermeneutics, and finally settling on a *bosadi* hermeneutic.³³

African women are certainly to be applauded for taking the cultural debate (as captured in the inculturation model) to another level by developing innovative methods such as feminist cultural hermeneutics,³⁴ for culture is an integral part of our lives and identities. The focus in feminist cultural hermeneutics is on retaining those aspects of African culture which are liberative, while rejecting those which are oppressive. The standard by which this is measured is the standard of abundant life for both women and men – those things which are life-affirming are promoted and sustained while those which are life-denying are rejected. The focus on culture, however, while establishing a separate space for African women to theologise, can also have the adverse effect of “exoticising” African women’s discourses, while never really taking them seriously or giving them a place in the sun within mainstream theology.

³¹M. J. Masenya, “Esther and Northern–Sotho Stories: An African–South African Woman’s Commentary”, in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. M. W. Dube (Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 148.

³²T. Maluleke, “The Challenge of HIV/AIDS for Theological Education in Africa: Towards an HIV/AIDS Sensitive Curriculum,” *Missionalia* 29/2 (2001): 243.

³³M. J. Masenya, “Reading the Bible the Bosadi (womanhood) way,” *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa* 4, (1997) : 15.

³⁴Although this method has been pioneered by Musimbi Kanyoro within the field of feminist theology, it is an off-shoot of a broader discipline of cultural hermeneutics initiated and promoted by EATWOT.

Narrative Theology

A second feature is the focus on narrative theology. In point of fact, African women's theologies are primarily a narrative theology. Oduyoye describes this as follows:

In their theological reflections, women of the Circle proceed from the narrating of the story to analyzing it to show how the various actors in the story see themselves, how they interact with others, and how they view their own agency in life as a whole The next stage is to reflect on the experiences from the perspective of the Christian faith – a conscious implementation of biblical and cultural hermeneutics are at work in this process.³⁵

It has to be noted though that narrative theology is not exclusively 'owned' by African women theologians. In fact it is a method widely developed and used by feminist theologians across the world and by other disciplines in theology as well.³⁶ The difference with the way it is used in African women's theologies is that it uses already existing forms of storytelling, proverbs, myths and sayings which are plentiful in African cultures, as sources of theologizing, from a woman's theology of liberation perspective.

A danger in this over-reliance on narrative as a method, though, is that sometimes narrative theology is seen as not being academically rigorous. Academic rigor requires that we read and engage with the works of other scholars, though as Oduyoye asserts, African women theologians do not have "to begin with reading other people's works, indeed most of the time the impulse to theologize is generated by experience or praxis. African women's theology does not end in documents".³⁷

Theological and Social Advocacy

A third feature of African women's theologies is the focus on the transformation of society – where commitment to advocacy for change by the Circle's membership is unmistakably witnessed. Using the analysis achieved through the application of feminist cultural hermeneutics, African women theologians:

identify what enhances, transforms or promotes in such a way as to build community and make for life-giving and life-enhancing relationships. The concern is not limited to the articulation of statements of faith.³⁸ Women do theology to undergird and nourish spirituality for life.³⁹

³⁵Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theologies*, 16.

³⁶See, for example, the extensive work of Anthony Balcomb on narrative theology as a method of systematic theological analysis, in "Narrative: Exploring New Ways of Doing Theology in the New South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 101 (1998): 11-23.

³⁷Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theologies*, 18.

³⁸See also Okure, "Feminist Interpretations in Africa," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. E. S. Fiorenza and S. Matthews (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 76-85.

³⁹Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theologies*, 16.

This focus on the transformation of society places African women's theologies firmly within the discourses of liberation theologies, which focus on raising the awareness of people in communities about their oppression, seeking thereby to overcome such oppression altogether. Classical Latin-American liberation scholars such as Gustavo Gutierrez and Míguez Bonino have been known to champion the course of the poor and oppressed, spending half their time in the academy and the other half living and working amongst them.

Finally, between 2002 and 2007, the Circle declared HIV/AIDS to be a major priority of research and advocacy for change and empowerment. The Circle recognized that the gendered nature of HIV/AIDS, particularly in Africa, compels its members to reflect theologically on these issues, and to empower communities through conscientisation. Given that religion is often the vehicle for promoting stigma and discrimination, the Circle has prioritized its role in education-raising on these matters. Such education is born out of deep theological reflection on the context of HIV/AIDS in Africa. This theological reflection has also borne fruit in mainstreaming HIV/AIDS into the theological curriculum of institutions⁴⁰

Communal Theology

The fourth feature of African women's theologies is what might be called a "theology of relations." Here the focus is on replacing hierarchies with mutuality. As Oduyoye has pointed out:

There is a marked emphasis on relations because African culture is very community-orientated and therefore requires all to be sensitive not only to the needs of others, but also to the well-being of the community as a whole.⁴¹

This means that the community of women which the Circle theologises about is taken very seriously in their work. We have already alluded to our own personal roles in conducting empowerment workshops for women in our own communities. We are not the only scholars who take such an active role in the community. A prime example of someone who takes communal theology seriously is that of the Kenyan theologian, Musimbi Kanyoro. In a seminal article on communal theology, Kanyoro emphasizes the importance of doing theology in community, and argues that this is a contribution to which African women have to make in their field of theology.⁴² There are many other African women theologians who also engage in communal theology and are making a difference in the lives of women of faith.

The Circle also provides critical space, through its chapters and conferences, for women to do communal theology of a scholarly type as well. A good example of this

⁴⁰See Dube 2003; Phiri, Haddad and Masenya 2003.

⁴¹Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theologies*, 17.

⁴²M. Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the Twenty-First Century," *Feminist Theology* 27 (2001): 36-56.

is the Pietermaritzburg chapter of the Circle in South Africa, where those women who have experience in researching and publishing mentor students and those who have little by way of field research and publishing experience. This is also a way of doing communal theology. There are many other Circle chapters throughout the African continent who follow a similar model.

A further type of scholarly communal theology can be found in the work of the Nigerian biblical scholar Teresa Okure. Okure insists that the task of African feminist hermeneutics is not simply the liberation of women alone, but the entire community. As Rakoczy⁴³ notes, "liberation of women does not mean the oppression of men." Here Rakoczy touches on the key feature of inclusivism in womanist hermeneutics. Alice Walker defines womanism as:

A black feminist of colour ... From the black Womanish ... Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. A woman who loves other women, sexually or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility ... and women's strength. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health.⁴⁴

Okure also argues that feminist biblical scholarship in Africa is made up of both scholars and non-scholars, highlighting her commitment to popular readings of the Bible⁴⁵ and to the community at large.

A problem which can be raised with this "theology of relations"⁴⁶ or communal theology is the need to balance this "theology of relations" with a "theology of gender justice." This is because sometimes the needs of the community are promoted at the expense of gender justice. In addition, when one speaks of a "theology of relations," the environment is included. However, with the exception of a few individuals⁴⁷ there is limited scholarship extant within Africa that foregrounds eco-feminist theological reflection. Perhaps this could be an area of interest that African women theologians might want to dedicate future research to.

⁴³Rakoczy, *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology*, 172.

⁴⁴Alice Walker, *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (London: Women's Press, 1983), xi-xii.

⁴⁵Teresa Okure, "Feminist Interpretations in Africa," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. E. S. Fiorenza (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 77.

⁴⁶M. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001:17.

⁴⁷See I. Phiri, "African Traditional Religion and Eco-feminism: The Role of Women at Chisumphi Shrine in Preserving Ecology," in *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*, ed. R. R. Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 161-171.

The Bible And African Women's Theologies

Fifthly, the Bible is a central source of theologizing in African women's theologies. Here the Bible is used in dialogue with African culture and religions. Several studies have shown the interconnectedness between the cultures in the Bible (particularly the Hebrew Bible and African culture). Having found "Africa in the Bible", many inculturation scholars have been at pains to point out that Christianity indeed contains elements of African culture within it, and that this simply bolsters the case against the missionaries' demonizing of certain African cultural practices such as polygamy.⁴⁸ Because of its closeness in terms of culture with African culture, the Bible has become a rich source of doing African theology. Once again, although there was "an irruption within an irruption" as African women biblical scholars and even those not theologians and those not classically trained in biblical studies, began to raise their voices in remonstrance against the often over-simplified and uncritical way in which cultural practices such as purity laws and menstruation, polygamy, or inheritance, found justification from within the Bible. At first, this analysis was simply a means of protest rather than a systematic analysis of biblical texts using the tools of biblical criticism. There was, however, soon a growing assemblage of women, trained in classical biblical studies, who applied the tools of biblical criticism in their hermeneutical endeavours with the Bible.

Together with these trained African women biblical scholars, African women theologians have utilized the Bible as a source of their theologies, but have taken issue with the often simplistic parallels that are drawn between biblical African cultures, especially in the way they deal with women. A good example is the now-famous story used by Mercy Oduyoye (after which the Talitha Qumi Centre in City, Ghana is named)⁴⁹ of the Gospel of Mark's account of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:21-42). African women theologians have therefore used the metaphor of the rising of this young girl as a key metaphor for their own liberation from oppression. Of course, in most stories of liberation it is usually Jesus who acts as the liberator. Notwithstanding the liberating potential in the methodology of highlighting the salvific role of Jesus towards African women from biblical and cultural oppression, the methodology has been problematic for Jewish feminist theologians, who have accused African women of promoting anti-Semitic sentiments. Kwok Pui-Lan, a leading Asian feminist theologian has made the point that this is also true for Asian women:

In the attempt to find some security in their Christian identity, many continue to emphasize that Jesus was a feminist, while condemning Jewish culture as irredeemably patriarchal. There is little effort to recognize the leadership roles of Jewish women in their

⁴⁸The history of African Initiated Churches (AICs) can be traced to a large extent to this development.

⁴⁹For more information on the vision and work of this important centre, see: <http://www.pluralism.org/events/wrsc2/transcripts/wrsc2-panel9.html/>

synagogues, then and now, nor the kind of transformation going on in Judaism as a result of the feminist critique.⁵⁰

In other words, Jewish feminist theologians argue that by constantly pointing out the negative aspects of Jewish culture, while neglecting the strong role which Jewish women played in their religion, African women theologians (and presumably other feminists as indicated by Kwok Pui-Lan) perpetuate anti-Semitic sentiments. Inherent to this debate is the acknowledgement of diversity within feminist theological discourse, which simply highlights yet again the importance of context in the praxis of theologizing.

Race, Class and Gender in African Women's Theologies

A sixth feature of African women's theologies, and one that is related to its focus on liberation theology, is concern over the issues of race, gender and class. Nowhere is this clearer than in the work of the Botswana-born biblical scholar, Musa Dube, who names her methodology "post colonial feminist hermeneutics." Arguably one of the most theoretically astute methodologies to come out of African women biblical scholarship, Dube's work focuses primarily on the oppressive nature of the Bible towards women, which she views as a multi-layered reality. In her work, Dube is interested in the role of the Bible in promoting not only gender oppression but also that of imperial domination. The task of feminist postcolonial criticism is not simply to hold a "pity-party" for the wrongs of the past, but to actively work towards the transformation of the present. Dube has produced profound examinations of the interconnection of imperial and gender discourses, such as in her famous work, "Divining Truth for International Relations."⁵¹

Furthermore, women scholars from South Africa in particular have focused on the determinants of race and class in their work. The works of Madipoane Masenya, Christina Landman (2002), Denise Ackermann (1966), Beverley Haddad (2000 and 2002) and Sarojini Nadar (2001) are examples of these.

The Inter-disciplinary and Multi-faith Nature of African Women's Theologies

Apart from focusing upon the interconnectivity of race, class, culture and gender, African women's theologies have made their impact felt further and wider. Apart from Christianity, the African continent is home to other religions, including African Religion, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. The African concept of community is both inclusive and holistic in nature, and as such includes both the living and the dead. In addition, earthkeeping and the environment are important notions within the African milieu.

⁵⁰Kwok, "The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, 70.

⁵¹M. Dube, "Divining Truth for International Relations," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. M. Dube (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 179-198.

The inter-faith nature of the African community has been taken seriously by African women theologians, although most work has been done in the disciplines of Christianity and African Religion. These disciplines have engaged predominantly African Christian women in such a way that usually African Religion is used only in the service of Christianity. Dube has made the excellent observation that while African Religion has always been subject to the “saving grace of Jesus Christ,” it has never been taken seriously as an independent entity.⁵² This is why scholars such as Nokuzola Mndende, who operate solely within the confines of the discipline of African Religion, have fought for it to be recognized as a self-sustaining discipline within the Circle, and thereby methodologically separate from the project of Christian theology.

Whilst admitting that the multi-faith work of the Circle is at this present time limited in scope, the work of African women theologians is nevertheless inter-disciplinary in nature. Although a wide range of disciplines are present, including the history of Christianity, biblical studies, religious studies and practical theology, African women’s theologies still remain a marginal project. We submit, therefore, that besides simply recognizing African women’s theologies as an authentic discipline within the field of theology, because of its inter-disciplinary nature it should be mainstreamed into all theological disciplines.

Conclusion

By profiling one of its products, namely, African women’s theologies, we have within the scope of this article attempted to reveal the richness and diversity of feminist theological discourse. This said, we nevertheless recognize that, together with other feminist theologies, African women’s theologies remain possibly the most marginalized discipline within mainstream theologizing. By highlighting the methodological and theoretical perspectives that undergird African women’s theologies, we hope to challenge the notion that African women’s theologies are an authentic discipline of theology in and of itself, although we recognize that more theoretical work needs to be done in this area. In collaborating on this article, we have realized that much of the groundwork has been laid and those of us who work in the field are now simply stacking the building blocks of this theology of liberation.

Unfortunately our inherited forms of Western theologizing are patently inadequate to respond meaningfully to the present crises that plague continental Africa, including HIV/AIDS, poverty and gender injustice. Tinyiko Maluleke has argued, for example, that in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, church has been rendered “theologically

⁵²M. Dube, “Adinkra! Four Hearts Joined Together: On Becoming Healing-Teachers of African Indigenous Religion/s in HIV & AIDS Prevention,” in *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed I. A. Phiri et al. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006), 131-156.

impotent".⁵³ He thus makes the concerted plea for us to return to a variety of theologies of liberation in order to effectively respond to these enormous challenges. We submit that African women's theologies are a good place to start.

⁵³Maluleke, "The Challenges of HIV/AIDS for Theological Education in Africa: Towards an HIV/AIDS Sensitive Curriculum," *Missionalia* 29/2 (2001): 126.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Theology of the African Independent Churches in Southern Africa: The Case of Botswana

Obed N. Kealotswe

Introduction

This chapter discusses the theology of the African Independent Churches (AICs) in Southern Africa. It focuses on Southern Africa with references to the whole of Africa. The chapter argues that there has been a theological shift in the AICs, defined in three stages: anti-missionary, collaborative/ecumenical, and modern. In the anti-missionary theological stage, the theology of the AICs was debatable and labeled “syncretistic”. During the second, collaborative/ecumenical stage, the AICs began to be recognized by the mission-founded churches; and in the modern stage, the AICs are struggling to be relevant to their communities and societies by addressing current issues. The chapter gives examples, drawn from Botswana, which have implications for the whole of Africa. In this chapter a theological theoretical framework conceived of as changing and dynamic has been used. In this regard, some major aspects of the Christian faith, such as God, the Trinity, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Eschatology, Baptism, Holy Communion and the Church have been selected for discussion.

The Problem of African Independent Church Theology

The problem of whether the AICs have a theology or not has been one of the major issues in the study of the AICs. Barrett¹ has identified forty-two different characteristics in the Independent Churches as found in the then available literature. This study selects eight of the definitions² which have implications on the development of the theology of the AICs:

¹Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), 46.

²Ibid., 47.

Prophetic

A prophetic movement is a religious awakening founded and led by a charismatic figure who speaks from within a consciousness of being set apart for some divine purpose, adopts a critical stance towards the established order, proclaims a new religious idea or allegiance, and in the process attracts a considerable following.

Messianic

A messianic movement is one which, centred around a dominant personality, claims for him special powers beyond the prophetic and involves a form of identification with Christ.

Millennial

A millennial movement is one which preaches an imminent millennium, Golden Age or End of the World, involving the overthrow of oppressors from outside Africa, the expulsion or throwing into the sea of the white race, the return or resurrection of a culture-hero or of the ancestors bringing unlimited quantities of material goods, the rejuvenation of the old, and often the reversal of colour roles.

Nativistic

A nativistic movement is an organized attempt on the part of a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture, usually resulting in the rejection of European culture and a return to the old ways of traditional religion; often allied with it is an immunity cult rendering initiates immune from European assault.

Syncretistic

A syncretistic movement is one which amalgamates the Christian religion with traditional beliefs and concepts, and often with other non-Christian religious systems such as scientology, to such an extent that the revelation in Jesus Christ, and the Lordship of Christ over all other gods, is obscured, challenged or denied, leaving only an outwardly Christian appearance with a pre-Christian content.

Witchcraft Eradication

A witchcraft eradication movement, often inaccurately called a witch-hunt, anti-witchcraft cult or anti-sorcery drive, is one which offers a new medicine or ritual in the attempt to achieve total eradication of witchcraft.

Revival

A revival movement is any orthodox renewal or awakening of Christian faith within the mission churches, characterized by enthusiasm and a large following, but not resulting immediately in new movements outside those churches.

Separatist

A separatist movement is one that has been formed by secession either from a mission church or from an existing African independent church.

The above definitions are characteristic of most of the AICs in not only Southern Africa but Africa at large. It should be made clear, from the outset, that this study is not focused on the definitions per se but on their theological implications. The theology of each AIC, past and present, emerges from one of the above characteristics and how each church and their congregation perceive their central characteristic.³ Barrett argued that the rise of the AICs was an indication of how Africans, left alone, could interpret and understand the biblical message. This study takes a historical approach to the development of AIC theology in southern Africa with a special focus on Botswana as a case study.

The Development of the Theology of the African Independent Churches: From the 18th to the 20th Century

Barrett (1968), has made a good study of the rise of the AICs in thirty-four nations in Africa. The study is well divided into Western Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Africa, Central Africa, and Eastern Africa. The rise of the movements in the thirty-four nations dates from 1819 in Sierra Leone, West Africa, to 1871 in Lesotho, Southern Africa. Most of these movements were what Sundkler⁴ has labelled Ethiopian, in that they were mainly dissatisfied with missionary administration and colonialism and demanded some form of autonomy. In other words, their demands were somewhat political. Also, the majority of these churches did not develop theologies, which were completely different from those of the mission founded churches. To put our discussion in a proper historical context, this chapter clearly demarcates the periods of the rise of the AICs and their theologies. To do this, the chapter appeals to Hastings.⁵ Great attention is paid to the 1960s because it is within this period that many African states got their independence. Hastings has shown how African Christianity, as expressed in the mission-founded churches and the AICs, developed and assumed new roles in the newly forming communities and societies. These new roles led to the development of new theologies to address the new African Christians in independent African countries.

Daneel⁶ records that one of the earliest protest movements occurred in Central Africa in Angola. Kimpa Vita, who was renamed Donna Beatrice after her baptism in the Roman Catholic Church, led the first protest in Sao Salvador. In 1700, when she

³See D. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*.

⁴See B. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: OUP, 1961).

⁵See A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity 1950-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

⁶See M. I. Daneel, *Quest for Belonging: Introduction to a Study of African Independent Churches* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987).

was 20 years old, she claimed that she was possessed by the spirit of St. Anthony, abandoned all her worldly goods and began to proclaim the coming judgment of God. Her preaching was against the Catholic Church, especially, its formalism and externalism. She advocated destroying all crosses and images of Christ because, she said, they had simply become new fetishes replacing the old. Her theological message was that Christ came into the world as an African in Sao Salvador and had black apostles. She also proclaimed a utopia—a paradise on earth—and the restoration of the ancient Kongo empire. She announced that all the chiefs should assemble in Sao Salvador in order to restore the ancient Kongo empire under a new king. However, the Portuguese authorities imprisoned her and she was condemned to be burnt at the stake as a heretic. Donna Beatrice had all the characteristic of being messianic, nativistic and prophetic.

The other case recorded by Barrett⁷ and Daneel⁸ is that of Alice Lenshina in Zambia. Alice Lenshina formed the Lumpa Church in 1954. The church attracted hundreds of thousands out of the mission churches, both Protestant and Catholic. The movement was characterized by its refusal to pay taxes. This resulted in a clash with the new Zambian independent government, in which the church lost 700 of its members. There are no clear theological positions of this church to be found in the available literature. Reading from its resistance to the new government, one could say that it had millennial tendencies.

In line with these two cases, this chapter argues that there was a general and common trend in the theological development of the AICs into the mid-twentieth century to resist the mission founded theologies. The major characteristic of AIC theology was inculturation; many elements of African Traditional religious beliefs and practices were taken into AIC Christianity as a way of resisting the condemnation of African religious beliefs and practices. In southern Africa, such condemnations were typical among London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries, such as Robert Moffat, who sincerely believed that the Batswana had no concept of God at all.⁹ He, however, later realised that there was a need to translate the Bible into Setswana in order to make the gospel message relevant to the people in the context of their culture. In his translation, he used the name Modimo to mean God the Father of Jesus Christ; to the Batswana, Modimo refers to the transcendent God who can only be approached through the ancestors. Inculturation is very pronounced in the AICs, where the Old Testament (OT) is the major source of their theology. The strong monotheism of the OT is accepted by the AICs, who see Modimo as transcendent and without equal, not even Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

In South Africa, the end of the nineteenth century was characterized by serious political issues which victimized the Africans. The misunderstandings between the

⁷See Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*.

⁸See Daneel, *Quest for Belonging*.

⁹R. Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, London: John Snow, 1842: 244-262.

Boers and the British led to the despising of the African peoples even in the so-called Christian churches. The ill treatment of the Africans, even in church, made them to resort to protests, leading to the rapid formation of AICs. These AICs were characterized by two major tendencies, nativistic and messianic, which influenced the theological developments of the churches. The nativistic movements had a tendency to consolidate their traditional religious beliefs and concretize them in a figurehead. Thus in 1884, Nehemiah Tile¹⁰ formed the Tembu Church and made Ngangelizwe, the chief of the Tembu, its visible head. Sundkler¹¹ argues that the cause of this secession was not only opposition to European control, but also a positive desire to adapt the message of the church to the heritage of the Tembu tribe. The argument was that since the Queen of England was the head of the English Church, so the paramount chief of the Tembu should also be the head of the new religious organization.

Looking at the prevailing political situation, this chapter argues, in agreement with Hastings¹², that the century needed a type of Christ who was not just a suffering one, but one who identified with his people and led them to challenge the unjust political and economic structures of the period. In 1885, a split took place in the LMS at Taung in Bechuanaland which led to the formation of The Native Independent Congregational Church. Chief Kgantlapane became its head. He appointed ministers of his own to lead the church. In 1903¹³, Mothowagae Motlogelwa left the LMS to form the King Edward Bangwaketse Mission Church. That church did not develop any radical theology, since it was more of an administrative protest to the LMS. In 1908, prophets arose who claimed to possess supernatural powers to solve the social and economic problems of the Batswana.¹⁴ A traveling prophet, Sencho Legong, appeared and proclaimed himself an angel of God, a prophet, the Lord Jesus himself.¹⁵

Sencho Legong promised rain which would cover the hilltops, three harvests a year, absolute freedom from the white man and a return to all the old heathen customs of the past. The most important thing to note are the responses of the people. Some Bangwaketse responded by burning their Bibles and church hymnbooks, and offered the prophet gifts. Sencho reluctantly accepted 30 heifers, 129 sheep and goats, a gun, a span of 14 oxen, 1 wagon, several fowls and some corn. This chapter argues that the hard economic realities facing the Batswana at that time forced them to follow those promises. Ecologically, Botswana is generally a dry country with very little rain. The rinderpest epidemic of 1896/1897 was still new in the minds of the Batswana. This is the reason why they were not worried about rains, which would cover the hilltops and

¹⁰Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 38.

¹¹Ibid., 38.

¹²See Hastings, *A History of African Christianity*.

¹³J. M. Chirenje, *A History of Northern Botswana 1850-1910* (London: Associated University Press, 1977), 212; see also D. R. Boschman, *The Conflict Between New Religious Movements and the State in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* (Gaborone : Department of Theology and Religious Publications, 1994).

¹⁴Chirenje, *A History of Northern Botswana*, 218.

¹⁵Ibid.

by so doing drown them. Instead, they accepted the message. This incidence has formed the basic manner in which the Batswana respond to new messages. For as long as a message addresses their economic needs, Batswana are ready to accept it! The rise of the Head Mountain of God Apostolic Church in Zion (HMG), in North Eastern Botswana¹⁶, is a classic example of this trend. When the HMG came to Francistown in 1940, it was faced with many challenges. Daniel Dube and Smart Mthembu were prophets who engaged in both witch-hunting and helping people to gain back their economic and political power from the rising Tati Company, which was taking all the land and the wealth of the people. To fight witch-craft, the name of Jesus Christ was exalted above all others. By calling on Jesus, Daniel Dube and Smart Mthembu would discover all the harmful fetishes hidden by the witches.¹⁷ Daniel Dube and Smart Mthembu had powers beyond those of the traditional healers, *Ngangas*, who were trusted by the local tribal chiefs. The chiefs who did not accept the prophetic healings of Daniel Dube and Smart Mthembu, always reported them to the police at Tshesebe, who then got them detained at Tshesebe Police Station. When they were taken to Francistown for a hearing, the magistrate could not find them guilty because the British Constitution, which was used to rule the Bechuanaland Protectorate (the present Botswana), proclaimed religious freedom. Their theology of Christ, as the absolute healer, made Christ the greatest of all *ngangas* who diagnosed with the spirit and not the divining bones (*ditaola*).

The Ngwato were equally concerned about the rise of the new Zionist prophets, whom they thought would excite the people against the Ngwato. The Ngwato had given away most of the land of the Kalanga to Queen Victoria, as a token of thanks for the protection given by the British Government. The rest of the land of the Kalanga was sacrificed to Lobengula, King of the Ndebele in Zimbabwe. The Ngwato did this, to avoid strong Kalanga solidarity, which would challenge the Ngwato hegemony. By moving the boundary from Khami to Vakaranga in 1912, Khama wanted to destroy Kalanga solidarity. The 120,000 who were cut away from the rest of their number could not claim any sovereignty through a paramount chief, and remained subjects of the Ngwato. Such a move had serious religious repercussions. The LMS, which was used by the Ngwato to suppress all the so-called minor tribes in Ngwato country was challenged by the new theologies of the emerging Zionist and Apostolic spiritual churches. The HMG did not hesitate to appeal to ancestral interference in the lives of its members. The good life of the past was projected into the future and by so doing, gave people hope that one day things would become normal, and poverty would be eliminated, ushering in a period of prosperity. Healing became a central part of theological development, specifically holistic healing, with a focus on good environmental practices and the provision of healthy food. The political powers who supported economic exploitation and poverty were to be fought and defeated, not by war, but by a new

¹⁶See O. Kealotswe, "Doctrine and Ritual in an African Independent Church" (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1994).

¹⁷Int. with Maria Kaoyao, Francistown, Bluetown, 9-8- 1985.

understanding of the healing works and powers of the gospel. This new message not only worried the governing powers of the time, but also had an impact on the LMS, which had long been protected by the Ngwato, Kwenā, Tawana and Ngwaketse chiefdoms, backed by the colonial government. The LMS issued several complaints to the colonial government, asking it to suppress the rise of the AICs, but without any success.

The Period from the 1960s to the Late 1970s

The 1960s realized a rapid growth in African Independent Churches, not only in South Africa but also in Botswana. The AICs which grew in Botswana were mainly imports from South Africa, as the South Africans were facing their greatest oppression since the formalization of apartheid by the Malan government in 1948. Many AICs formed not only as Christian protest movements but also as messianic movements whose leaders provided them with security and support in an apartheid society. The rise of Shembe and Lekganyane as religious leaders led to the emergence of church villages where people could set themselves free from their daily suffering in the townships adjacent to the white suburbs and growing industries of South Africa. A weekend spent at Ekuphakameni or at Moria sacred centres meant a lot to the suffering South Africans, who were experiencing daily discrimination at work and in the streets of the cities. Shembe and Lekganyane were not only seen as religious liberators but also as political leaders. To strengthen the position of the leaders, new theologies developed. The first change was that the leaders of African Independent Churches were regarded as messiahs fighting for the liberation of their members instead of turning the other cheek as the suffering Jesus had taught. They were regarded as healers whose role was to restore wholeness to their suffering members. To effect this, there was a theological tendency to merge traditional religious beliefs and practices into the Christian gospel. Thus, the ancestral spirit was transformed into the Holy Spirit to direct the life of the church; God became transcendent so that the roles of Jesus Christ the Son, the Holy Spirit from God and that of the church leader should be put into a clear hierarchy. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity could be accepted on clear lines of hierarchical demarcations.

The early 1960s saw some changes in attitude towards the AICs, especially in the Ngwato District, which experienced the highest number of the AICs.¹⁸ Members of the Ngwato Central District Council argued that the AICs should be allowed, provided they built schools, clinics and hospitals as mission churches did. This tolerance led to the multiplication of the AICs. In South Africa, the strong consolidation of the AICs, such as the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) and the Amanazareta of Shembe, encouraged AIC leaders in Botswana to strengthen their headquarters. Jackalasi No2 (North Eastern Botswana)¹⁹ was consolidated into a very strong centre of the HMG, whilst Matsiloje Village and Francistown (White City), became strong centres of, respectively, the Spiritual Healing Church and the St John Apostolic Faith Mission.

¹⁸O. N. Kealotswe, "Doctrine and Ritual," 220.

¹⁹Kealotswe, "Doctrine and Ritual," 119.

These changes demanded matching political developments, such as the formation of the Botswana Peoples Party (BPP) by Philip Matante. Pudiephatswa, a very strong member of the Head Mountain of God Apostolic Church, was one of the earliest leaders of the BPP. Bishop Smart Mthembu also became a member of the BPP. The BPP was very strong in Francistown and the Northeast District, where people had lost their land; it promised the people that once in power, it would take back all the land the Ngwato chiefs had given to Queen Victoria. The Tati Company (TC), which was in charge of the disputed lands, would be driven out, and the Kalanga people could reclaim their land. Francistown was developing into an industrial town because of gold mining and many people were moving from the crowded villages into the new settlement. Under the pressure of a rapidly increasing population, the church leaders in Francistown and the surrounding villages had no choice but to support the BPP.

The theology of the AICs addressed the needs of the people. The suffering Christ of the missionaries was replaced by the messianic leaders, who, to a large extent, remembered the past when their people lived in peace and tranquillity before the arrival of the colonial powers. The messianic leaders appealed to the past when the Kalanga people traded with both the Ngwato and the Ndebele. The Kalanga had used their wealth to conquer the Ndebele economically, who had conquered them politically.²⁰ The new theology was a revivalist one which integrated the traditional religious beliefs of the Kalanga. Jesus was presented as a super ancestor whose message would restore the old Kalanga chiefdoms and their wealth; Jesus took the place of the *nganga*.

The role of the traditional *nganga* had been usurped by prophets, who used a higher spirit from Christ to play the role held by the *nganga* in traditional societies. The similarities between the *nganga* and the prophet have been discussed by Schoffeleers²¹, making references to Sundkler.²² Although these earlier observations had rather negative attitudes toward these similarities, the study by Schoffeleers, which comes much later, simply shows that the theology of the AICs had integrated well with traditional cultural and religious beliefs. Schoffeleers has gone to the extent of applying the paradigm not only to prophets but also to Jesus Christ and pastors as *nganga*. He goes further to discuss also *nganga* as pastor and *nganga* as Christ.²³ From his many examples, drawn from many parts of Africa, there is no doubt about the theological shift that is taking place in the AICs of Africa.

²⁰See M. B. Bhebe, "The Ndebele and Mwari before 1893: A religious conquest of the conquerors by the vanquished," in *Guardians of the Land: Essays on Central African Territorial Cults*, ed. M. Schoffeleers (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1979).

²¹M. Schoffeleers, "Christ in African folklore: The *nganga* paradigm," in *Religion in Africa*, ed. T. D. Blakely et al. (London: James Currey, 1994), 73-88.

²²Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 242.

²³Schoffeleers, "Christ in African folklore," 73-88.

One of the causes of this change in theology is the impact of modernity and postmodernity²⁴ Ritzer has pointed out that there are two theories concerning the twenty-first century. The first group of theorists, such as Habermas and Giddens, believe that we still live in a modern society which could be theorized in the same way that social thinkers have always done. On the other hand, there are social theorists such as Frederick Jameson and Arthur Kroker, who argue that we now live in a qualitatively different, postmodern society, where there are no proper values such as history or culture. In other words, everything is changing very fast and there are no permanent values.

Faced by this situation, the AICs are developing theologies which give meaning and value to life. The appeal to the past is not just a utopian dream. It is a recapturing and re-living of the past in a transformed manner that makes life have value and meaning in the midst of fast social changes of the twenty-first century. The consolidation of the major beliefs of Christianity, by the appeal to traditional culture and its transformation, is a way of saying that with God, everything is possible. It is a way of saying that human desires and wishes, which lead to injustices in communities and societies, are not the will of God. In situations where there is political domination and oppression, economic inequalities and human suffering in general, the AICs are continuously building and developing theologies which reinstate the value of the human being as created in the image of God. It is for this reason that it is very difficult to separate the different beliefs of the AICs on the major beliefs or doctrines of the Christian religion. They are all put together in various ways to give hope and meaning to life and humanity in the postmodern world. Many AICs believe that there is no salvation outside the church. It is in the church where one meets God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit who are the greatest *ngangas* of humanity and all its problems.

The other factor which precipitated theological change was that in 1966, Botswana gained its independence. The new Botswana Constitution allowed freedom of worship and religious affiliation. Reactions to religious freedom varied. The mission-founded churches saw independence as allowing false Christianity in Botswana. The AICs welcomed the move and supported the new government, because they could now worship freely without persecution. Soon after independence, the number of independent churches grew very rapidly. New churches developed from splits within the AICs. New churches from South Africa were brought by people working in the mines and industries.

Botswana society underwent rapid changes. The first change was the move from the rural villages to the growing towns, which cut people off from their traditional roots. Many people replaced the traditional family structure with that of the AICs, which included many traditional religious and cultural beliefs within their Christianity. There was a need to develop doctrines and theologies to address the changes from a cultural perspective.

²⁴ See G. Ritzer, *Classical Sociological Theory* (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 2000).

Sundkler²⁵ saw the theology of the AICs as bridges back to paganism because of their appeal to the OT, which had many religious and theological beliefs similar to African Traditional Religions (ATRs). The affirmation of ATR beliefs in the OT was viewed by Sundkler, from a western perspective, as an authentication of ATRs in the guise of Christianity. But in his study of the AICs in South Africa, Sundkler recognized that due to the local political conflicts, reading and interpreting the Bible from an African perspective was actually a move to concretize African Christianity.

Oosthuizen²⁶ regarded the AICs as a post-Christian movement in Africa. In his earliest writings, he described the AICs as bridges back to paganism, in agreement with Sundkler. However, in his later works, he became the greatest researcher and promoter of the AICs. One of his classic works is the *Healer Prophet*²⁷, wherein he discusses parallels between an AIC prophet and a traditional healer or *Nganga*. Researching and attending services of the AICs made Oosthuizen realize that the AICs have a good theology, based on both ATRs and the Bible. Daneel²⁸ argued that the AICs were no longer objects for mission but well established African forms of the expression of Christianity. Many studies in Southern Africa now share that view.

The Typology of African Independent Churches in Botswana

In Botswana, a study done by James N. Amanze²⁹ found 156 registered AICs, listed as follows: forty-four Apostolic; eighty-eight Spiritual; two Zionist; two Prophetic-Messianic; one Spiritual- Evangelical; one Prophetic; two Neo-Traditional; one Messianic-Apostolic; one Pentecostal- Apostolic; one Spiritual-Prophetic; one Apostolic-Spiritual.

Amanze, during an interview I had with him, informed me that he was given these categorizations by the churches themselves. It appears to me, however, that these categorizations are not accurate. This is because the names of the churches are completely different from their nature. A church could have in its name the words "Apostolic and "Zionist", but might actually be a spiritual church. Church names were created for the purpose of registration; therefore, they do not imply the nature of the church or its theological standpoint. It should also be noted that the classification of churches between 1991 and 1992, when the research was conducted, had also faced many changes from the traditional classification of Sundkler and earlier scholars. In my discussions with Amanze³⁰ he reiterated that many factors could have led to theological changes in the AICs. For instance, most of the founding leaders are gone,

²⁵See Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*.

²⁶See G. C. Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in Africa* (Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1968).

²⁷See G. C. Oosthuizen, *The Healer-Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

²⁸See Daneel, *Quest for Belonging*, where the concept of African Independent Churches, as expressions of African Christianity, has been discussed in detail.

²⁹See J. N. Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1994).

³⁰James N. Amanze (Prof., U. of Botswana), interview by author, 18 November 2008, University of Botswana.

replaced by new leaders aiming to make their churches relevant to the modern needs of their people. The most popular of those needs is healing. The AICs have a holistic approach to healing, which often includes aspects of African Traditional healing. The use of *diwacho* (ashes from cow dung, bones and other substances) has become a major attraction to many AICs, due to rapid social and economic changes in southern Africa. Botswana, with the fastest developing economy, has asked the AICs to assist with helping their people find jobs.

The AICs now find themselves competing with Traditional Healers and western scientific healers. There has been a major shift in their theologies towards a much more African Christianity style theology, which appeals to the Batswana. The twenty-first century has so far seen a gradual integration and the growth of mutual understanding between traditional healers and those of the AICs. This has fostered some great changes in the theology and beliefs of the AICs.

Finally, globalization and secularization, the fruits of modern and postmodern changes, are helping the AICs move towards convergence rather than divergence. The fact that the AICs are organized in associations also contributes to the growing theological unity characteristic of the modern situation. Therefore, one can now categorically speak of AIC theology, rather than the different AICs as reflected in earlier studies.

Some Aspects of the Theology of African Independent Churches

In his study *African Christianity in Botswana*³¹ Amanze explained how the AICs in Botswana have developed their theologies through an OT based understanding of Christianity. Kealotswe³² has discussed the theology of the AICs with reference to the Head Mountain of God Apostolic Church in Zion-Botswana. Amanze and Kealotswe have discussed the major beliefs and teachings of the AICs and have argued that these beliefs are shared by many AICs in Botswana, and Southern Africa. The following theological beliefs of the AICs show how they sustain the lives of AIC members in a modern, secular world.

God the Father

The African Evangelist United Church³³ recognizes God as three persons in one. The Father is the only one to be called God, because he is superior to the Son and the Holy Spirit. The AICs, both Zionist and Apostolic, understand God as the Father. Their concept of God is generally very similar to that of fatherhood in an African or human family. God the Father is the father of Jesus Christ. As God the Father, he is above everything else and transcends all things. Since God the Father is a transcendent God, he is revealed by his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ serves as the representative of

³¹See J. N. Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1998) where this has been discussed in detail.

³²See Kealotswe, "Doctrine and Ritual."

³³Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches*, 9-10.

God the Father, and consults God on behalf of the people. Similar to African concepts of God³⁴, the Father is a remote and transcendent God, rarely called to participate in human affairs. His Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit are always immanent and take active part in the daily lives of the church members. However, the transcendent God is always available through his Son Jesus Christ.

The Trinity

God is understood as a Trinitarian unity. This is derived from Matthew 28:19-20, where Jesus instructs his disciples to baptize those who believe, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The fact that Jesus Christ used the singular ("name"), rather than plural ("names"), means that God is one, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This oneness is similar to that of Tertullian³⁵, where the union refers, in a legal sense, to the ownership and control over the universe. The oneness is not similar to the philosophical, Pauline and Johannine oneness. It is an African form of oneness through delegation. The Son is delegated by the Father and the Son delegates the Holy Spirit. The delegated person has full authority equal to that of God the Father. Thus, Jesus is a full representative of the transcendent Father whilst the Holy Spirit is a representative of both God the Father and Jesus Christ.

In the Galatia Church in Zion³⁶, God is not equal to the Son and the Holy Spirit. He is above the two. Jesus cannot be called God but only the Son of God. The Holy Spirit features in the daily lives of the AICs even more than do the Son and the Father, because their understanding of the Holy Spirit is based on ancestor-worship. The ancestors are considered to be living spiritual beings with a high degree of control over the living members of their families. This belief permeates Botswana and Southern African Christianity.³⁷ Its presence is still felt amongst the Batswana, in spite of over two hundred years of Christianity. In the AICs, the value and importance of the ancestors has been replaced by the Holy Spirit. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether a prophet uses the Holy Spirit of Christianity or the ancestral spirit. In the Head Mountain of God Apostolic Church in Zion³⁸ at Jakalasi No.2, prophets are always tested during the Easter Celebrations, to make sure that they use the Holy Spirit of Christianity instead of the ancestral spirits. The belief is that when the Holy Spirit from Christ speaks to one prophet, all the other prophets present hear the same message being given. If others do not hear that message, it means that the prophet is prophesying through an ancestral spirit. The other prophets will then raise their sticks and hit the false prophet, as he is then called.

³⁴See J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1975).

³⁵See J. Gonzales, Vol. 1 of *A History of Christian Theology* (USA: Abingdon Press, 1983).

³⁶Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches*, 114-115.

³⁷See Amanze, *African Christianity in Botswana*.

³⁸See Obed N. Kealotswe, "An African Independent Church Leader," in *Studies on the Church in Southern Africa*, 1994.

The acceptance of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as the only sources of the prophetic spirit is in line with Nyamiti's hypothesis that Jesus Christ is our ancestor. To many AICs, both the Zionist and Apostolics, the Holy Spirit, which is believed to emanate from Christ, transcends the ancestral spirits. It is immanent and ever present in the lives of the churches. Unlike the ancestral spirits, which are evoked at certain times, the Holy Spirit of Christ or God is ever present. In this manner, it fully replaces the ancestral spirits, which are needed at certain times, especially when there is sickness in the family or some other form of disaster. The Holy Spirit is also universal, in that it transcends tribal, ethnic or national boundaries. Christians are composed of people of all tribes, ethnicities and nationalities. The Holy Spirit, which directs the daily lives of the churches, creates a high degree of unity amongst the members because it transcends family, tribal, ethnic or national ancestral spirits. Whereas in traditional culture and religion the ancestors of the chief yielded the greatest authority in the tribe or nation, in the AICs there is no such belief. The ancestors of the founders or bishops of the churches do not necessarily hold such authority. That authority lies with the one Holy Spirit, which controls the life of the church. The leader is always held in high esteem because it is he or she who has united the different people from different tribes and ethnicities through the preaching and teaching of the name and Word of Christ.

Many church leaders are believed to yield a lot of power over their members. This power does not in any manner place their ancestors above others. They are so honoured because of the unity which they bring amongst people of different origins and nationalities. Morongwa³⁹ is one such highly respected leader of the Lambs Followers Church. He is honoured because of his emphasis on the unity of Christians through the belief in the power of the Holy Spirit of God, which transcends the ancestors of individual people.

Thus to many AICs, the Holy Spirit controls the life of the church. In some AICs, especially Zionist versions, individuals are allowed to consult their ancestral spirits if they feel that the Holy Spirit has not answered their needs. However, when they come back to the church, they are always cleansed by being sprinkled with water before they can go into the church building to mingle with other believers. The cleansing is meant to drive away the ancestral spirit so that only the Holy Spirit will be present in the church.

Pneumatology

O'Collins and Farrugia⁴⁰ define pneumatology as "The branch of theology that studies the Holy Spirit." They point out that the letters of St. Paul testify to the role played by the Spirit in revealing God, enabling faith, inspiring prayer, dwelling in the church, blessing the community with various charisms and working toward the final consummation of all things in Christ. The passages used are: Romans 8: 1-27; 1 Cor. 2; 10-16; 12:1-

³⁹See Kealotswe, "Doctrine and Ritual."

⁴⁰See G. O'Collins and E. S. Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 185.

11 and Gal. 4:6. These passages show various aspects of the Holy Spirit and its roles. The Holy Spirit, is not, however, studied alone. It is always studied in the context of the trinity. This observation is characteristic of the AICs. The Holy Spirit never stands alone, as discussed above. It is always related to Christ and God the Father. In the African Evangelist United Church⁴¹ the Holy Spirit is the spirit of God. Through it, God brings peace, healing and the knowledge of God. In the Galatia Church in Zion⁴², the Holy Spirit comes from the Father.

But in many AICs, the Holy Spirit holds a very central position. It is the one that is even more immanent than Jesus Christ. This is so because when Jesus Christ ascended to heaven, he promised his disciples that he was not going to leave them alone. He promised them the Holy Spirit, which he referred to as the Comforter. Jesus also instructed his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until the arrival of the Holy Spirit, which will give them power to preach the Word of God without fear. It is this spirit which inspired many AICs leaders, such as Smart Mthembu of the HMG⁴³ and Sebolao⁴⁴, to defy the Bechuanaland Colonial Government and the Botswana chiefs to establish the AICs in Botswana. In the AICs, the Holy Spirit gives power. When the prophets are possessed, they go into trances similar to those of the OT prophets. The belief is that the power comes from God the Father and Jesus Christ who are all embodied in the Holy Spirit.

The lives of the AICs depend on the power of the Holy Spirit, which is given to the prophets to lead and guide the church. When the members partake in sacraments, such as baptism and the Holy Communion, they depend on the Holy Spirit to be with them to give them the power to receive these ritualistic sacraments. Sacraments are sources of faith in the members. In some cases they also provide holistic healing. Thus, without the Holy Spirit, there is no church.

Soteriology

Soteriology refers to the doctrine of Salvation. It studies the role played by Jesus Christ in saving humanity. In the OT, salvation was associated with wealth. When the Israelites claimed that they were saved, they meant the defeat of their enemies by Yahweh and the wealth which they got from their promised land. Prosperity, amongst the Israelites, was the sign of salvation. This understanding of salvation is similar to that of the AICs.

The AICs argue that there is no salvation outside the church. Salvation takes place immediately upon becoming a member of the church. Salvation is materialized in a good life without poverty and suffering. To help people to get salvation and prosperity, the AICs believe in healing. This healing is holistic in that it takes care of the total welfare of the believers. If people are poor and suffering, they cannot claim to be

⁴¹Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches*., 9-10.

⁴²See Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches*, 114-115.

⁴³See Kealotswe, "Doctrine and Ritual."

⁴⁴Int. with Fidelis Nkomazana, April 3, 2008, Gaborone.

saved. To make salvation a reality, the AICs use healing to make the lives of their members better. They heal both physical and spiritual diseases. Members are fortified against evil forces of nature and evil people. Members are helped to get employment through hot-baths and *diwacho* of all kinds.

Unemployed church members are generally taken care of by their *bakaulengwe*. The word *bakaulengwe*, which refers to a wide extended family, is a continuation of the Botswana and African understanding of life where the community comes before the individual. The needs of the community are also individual needs. When the community is poor, the individual becomes poor. When the community is rich, the individual becomes rich. The communal rich life constitutes salvation in the AICs.

Salvation is also futuristic. The futuristic aspect of salvation is what happens after life in this world. Basically, the AICs believe that a person is a dual being. There is the spiritual person (*motho wa mowa*), and the physical person (*motho wa nama le madi*). When death occurs, the physical person dies whilst the spiritual one continues to live in heaven with Christ or in hell with the Devil. The spiritual person resembles an ancestor in African cosmology. Life is continuous. Death is a change of status or a change of geography. One moves from the physical world into the spiritual world. Heaven is understood as a spiritual world. This is the reason why it never gets overpopulated in spite of the fact that people have been dying for billions of years. When Jesus spoke of the many mansions in heaven, he was referring to the spiritual homes. In the AICs, similarly to ATRs, the spirit of a person is very important. It is referred to as *Mowa*. When a person has a bad character, the person is referred to as *o mowa o maswe*, which translates that the person has a bad spirit. The Holy Spirit, which possesses and controls the lives of the believers, makes them good people. When such people die, they go straight to heaven. There is no waiting, as implied in Pauline theology. The dead in the AICs do not wait for the second coming of Christ. They go to heaven immediately after death. During the overnight vigil at funerals, people sing hymns which escort the moving spirit to help it cross the River Jordan on its way to heaven. The River Jordan is not just a physical river, but has spiritual significance. One funeral song runs as follows:

*Ga o tlola noka ya Jorotane
O ipolele melato.*

When you cross the river Jordan
Confess your sins.

This chorus could be sung throughout the night. It is especially sung when the dead person might have not been a highly committed church member. But when a good Christian has died, the Sesotho hymn which is always sung goes as follows:

Haufi le Morena, haufi nyana

Nearer to thee my Lord

The basic understanding of this song is that the spirit of the deceased is on its way to heaven.

Eschatology

O'Collins and Farrugia⁴⁵ define eschatology as knowledge of the last things. It is that branch of Systematic Theology which studies the final kingdom as expressed by its preparation from the OT, the preaching of Jesus and the teaching of the NT church. There is, however, a lot of confusion and uncertainty about the last things. In some NT examples (Luke 11:20, 1 Cor. 10:11), the death and resurrection of Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God but still to come. This is also expressed in Mk 13; Luke 11:2; 1 Cor. 15:20-28, when Christ will come in glory to judge the living and the dead. The kingdom is also expressed in Matt: 31-46; Rev: 22:12-13, which state that the kingdom will come when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead.

The above understandings of the kingdom of God are foreign to the AICs. Some AICs refer to them just because the Bible states so. The Galatia Church in Zion⁴⁶ believes that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. But the general theology and belief of the AICs is that eschatology is immediate. When a person dies, that person is already judged as to whether he or she is going to heaven or to hell. The criterion of salvation, as stated above, is that membership of a church is already a sign of salvation and a self-preparation for the end of time, which is death.

Similarly to the African concept of death, the spirit is immediately judged at death. Thus in many sermons which are preached at overnight vigils, the emphasis is on the belief that the spirit of the dead person is either sitting comfortably in the bosom of Abraham or it is on its way to heaven; in which case, it has to be escorted. The AICs believe that Jesus Christ came to judge the living and the dead. Those who are in him are already in heaven. Those who do not believe in him are already in hell. Death leads them, on the spot, to heaven or to hell.

Baptism

The doctrine of Baptism is the key, entry and central point to AIC theology. In the African Evangelist United Church,⁴⁷ Baptism brings people into the Kingdom of God, cleans all the past sins and makes the person a new creature. In the Galatia Church in Zion,⁴⁸ Baptism is performed for the forgiveness of sins. In the Holy Apostolic Church in Zion⁴⁹ Baptism is performed by a single immersion in the three names of the Trinity. Children are baptized when they are one year old. At Baptism, one is already accepted in the kingdom of God, which is symbolized by the church on earth. The importance of Baptism lies in the manner in which it is carried out.

Baptism, which is done in pools, rivers and dams, is preceded by an overnight vigil in which people renounce the devil and his angels. The devil does not want to lose his followers. The devil tries to resist the Baptism by putting dangerous objects such as

⁴⁵G. O'Collins and E. S. Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 69.

⁴⁶Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches*, 114-115.

⁴⁷Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches*, 9-10.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 114-115.

⁴⁹See Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches*.

water snakes—Kgwanype—into the water, which have to be removed before baptism takes place. Kgwanype sometimes moves from one pool to another, and could be accompanied by terrible and destructive thunderstorms. When members of the AICs go to baptize their members, they pray overnight for protection from this dangerous snake. There are many cases of people dying at baptismal pools because of failure to pray hard for the snake to move out of the water. The latest case had three people dying in a pool at Kumakwane Village in the Kolobeng River.

The scientific explanation for such drowning incidents is that at baptisms, the prophet will always wade across the water to a depth of between 1.2 metres to 1.5 metres. If the sand of the pool is very loose, the prophet can be pulled to the deepest side of the pool, and if he does not know how to swim, then he drowns. However, African Tribal Religions agree with the belief of the AICs that there is always a Kgwanype in the pool. If the prayers at the overnight vigil have not been answered by Christ and the Holy Spirit, people always die at baptisms.

The other common fear is that when a person is baptized, the ancestral spirit loses its full control over the Christian, who now falls under the full control of the Holy Spirit. When this happens, an unhappy ancestor could also cause drowning at baptism. The success of Baptism is an assurance of heaven and the kingdom of God.

Holy Communion

The Holy Communion plays a very important aspect in AIC Christianity. It is believed to be a reminder of the Last Supper. In western Christianity, the Holy Communion is one of the most debated doctrines of the Christian faith. Douglas⁵⁰ gives a detailed study of the origins and different meanings of the Lord's Supper, as the Holy Communion is also called. It has its origins in the Passover Feast of the Jews. To Paul, it is the Eucharistic (thanksgiving) meal, which is also acceptable to the Apostolic Fathers.⁵¹ To the AICs, the Holy Communion is not a subject for discussion and debate. It is taken as an instruction from the Lord Jesus Christ, which has to be performed. It is also seen as a ritual which every member of the church has to undergo. In the African Evangelist United Church⁵², Holy Communion is taken twice a month. It washes away any sins people may have committed after Baptism.

Communion is usually held once a year, at Easter, when the entire congregation gathers at the headquarters of the church. Partaking in this meal is ritualistic; the bread and wine represents the physical body of Jesus Christ. Once one has taken the meal, it is an assurance of salvation and of protection from disease and illness.

In some AICs, Communion is held twice a year: at Easter and at Christmas; in others, it is quarterly. In the Galatia Church in Zion⁵³, Communion is celebrated three

⁵⁰D. G. Douglas, *The New Bible Dictionary* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974 reprint), 748-752.

⁵¹See Gonzales, *A History of Christian Thought*.

⁵²Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches*, 9-10.

⁵³Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches*, 114-115.

times a year: at Christmas, Good Friday and at the Annual Conference, which is always held in Serowe. Unleavened bread and sacramental wine are used as symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In the Holy Apostolic Church in Zion⁵⁴, Communion is taken once a year at Easter.

Communion service is always preceded by an overnight vigil, which allows people to pray for forgiveness for any sins they might have committed since their last Communion. When people receive Communion, they are renewed and re-committed back to Christ. The importance of Communion is also discussed by Jules- Rosette⁵⁵, with reference to the Maranke Apostles. Confession of sin is very important before members can partake in the Pendi, as Communion is sometimes called. This same procedure is followed by almost all the AICs. The AICs do not regard Communion as a simple symbolic representation of the Last Supper, as expressed in Calvinistic Theology⁵⁶. It is similar to pre-Vatican II Catholic Theology, where emphasis was put on the physical presence of Jesus Christ in the bread and wine.

The Church

The AICs, in general, believe that there is no salvation outside the church. The church is not only understood as a community of believers in Jesus Christ, it is also a physical place where the believers meet regularly to praise God, confess their sins and maintain a good relationship with God and each other. It is in the church where believers take care of each other. In most cases, members of the AICs know each other by name, regardless of how many members attend that particular church. This personal connection and sense of community care is a major attraction to the AICs.

It has been noted above that in the church, the presence of God is felt through the activities of the Holy Spirit, who is the guiding factor in the life of the church. Without the Holy Spirit, there is no church. In many AICs, the Holy Spirit comes directly from God the Father. It is even more important than Jesus Christ because Jesus allowed himself to become human and suffered death. Even though Jesus was resurrected, his death showed his weakness. This weakness has always been used by the mission churches to encourage Africans to be humble like Christ so that they could withstand political and economic suffering. Most AIC leaders are politically and economically powerful people, because they represent salvation in their churches; and salvation, as previously stated, is understood in OT terms of political liberation and economic prosperity. It is the type of salvation realized by Kings David and Solomon, who were blessed by Yahweh with material wealth.

⁵⁴See Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches*.

⁵⁵See B. Jules-Rosette, "Prophecy and Leadership in the Maranke Church," in *African Christianity: Patterns of Religious Continuity*, ed. G. Bond et al. (Cardiff: Academic Press, 1979).

⁵⁶See J. Calvin, Vol. 2 of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London: James Clark & Company, 1957); also W. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1968).

The church, in the AICs, is a wealthy place which caters to all the needs of their members. Large amounts of wealth are displayed at the major church festivals to show how people should live in their local churches. Church members are told to assist each other so that all members should have food and all the basic necessities of life. It is only then that they can boast that they know God and they are Christians.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that AIC theology is not static but dynamic. It has moved from a theology of protest to a theology of syncretism and finally into a theology of transformation. It is the theology of transformation that is making Christianity relevant today. The theology of transformation is not only found within the AICs; it is characteristic of all the Christian churches, from Roman Catholic to Protestant, Evangelical and Charismatic. It is also commonly found in the New Religious Movements, characterized by the developing ministries in southern Africa and Africa. All of these, implicitly or explicitly, appeal to some elements of traditional religious culture to understand the major beliefs of the Christian faith in a manner that is relevant to postmodernity. Preaching and teaching at funerals has become ecumenical in that all the ordinary members of the Christian church always emphasise the importance of church membership for one to go to heaven. They emphasize the fact that the dead are judged and go to heaven or hell immediately after death. The idea of waiting for the second coming of Christ is not popular in African Christianity. Death is nothing but a change of geographical status, where one goes to sit in the bosom of Abraham or goes to suffer in hell.

In conclusion, all Christian theologies are dynamic and are always relevant to the needs and expectations of their societies and communities. The AICs, however, have a holistic approach to life, which has put them in the lead in the transformation of theological beliefs and practices in the postmodern world.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Introduction to Religious Studies

Francis C.L. Rakotsoane

Introduction

Religious Studies as an academic discipline is a systematic effort by scholars and researchers to investigate religion and religious phenomena, applying other methods used in the study of such disciplines as humanities and social sciences as well as those exclusively used in theology.¹ For this reason, it is a “multi-disciplinary, secular study of religious beliefs, behaviors, and institutions, emphasizing systematic, historically-based, and cross-cultural description, comparison, interpretation, and explanation”.² Wach has observed that:

The development of the discipline ... has been necessitated by the naïve claim of religious communities to an exclusive possession of truth – a claim unhampered by any doubt as to the adequacy of its apprehension and understanding ... When it prepares the ground for the raising of the problem of truth by gathering necessary data, this discipline is not only within its legitimate province but also is performing one of its essential functions.³

Originating in late 19th century in Europe, this area of study is believed to have begun with Max Muller.⁴ In 1856, this world-renowned scholar published a book entitled *Comparative Mythology*, followed by two more works: *Introduction to Science of Religion*, published in 1870 and *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as*

¹See F. Whaling (ed.), *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, Vol 1: The Humanities* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984); R. W. Hood et al., *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (New York: Guilford, 1996).

²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_studies as retrieved on 7/3/2007).

³J. Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 29.

⁴ See Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*; M. Dhavamony, *Phenomenology of Religion* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1973); N. Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (New York: Scribner, 1984).

Illustrated by the Religions of India, published in 1878. The said works marked the first stage of this discipline. Wach explains this stage in the following words:

This first stage of study was characterized by a genuine enthusiasm, a sincere desire to understand other religions, and a measure of speculative interest. Among the various forms of expression of religious experience it was mythology which attracted special attention.⁵

In its early years, the new discipline was known as Science of Religion (*Religionswissenschaft* in Germany and *Sciences de la religion* in the French-speaking world) or Comparative Religion/Comparative Study of Religions.⁶ In some parts of the world, such as the USA, this came to be known as History of Religion. It was called Science of Religion to denote the emancipation of the new discipline from theology.⁷ On the other hand, it was called Comparative Religion because of the general tendency of scholars in this field of knowledge to compare religious data from different religions. "Everyone was looking for parallels".⁸

In their search for such parallels, many scholars of this first stage of the discipline oftentimes neglected details. This general weakness in the first stage led to another stage in the study of the new discipline. Unfortunately, this stage too had its own limitations. It was characterized by a tendency to overlook dissimilarities in favour of similarities. Classical works associated with this stage include the works of Ernest Renan, Dietrich Rwtzenstein, Wissowa, Norden, Gunkel, Frazer, Moore and Boas.⁹ This new phase of the study of the discipline in question was generally dominated by social scientists coming from sociological, anthropological and psychological backgrounds.¹⁰

A general dissatisfaction of some of the scholars with the above noted weaknesses led to yet another stage in the development of the new discipline. Wach identifies the following as the characteristics of this third phase:

⁵Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*, 3.

⁶See M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1987); I. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960); G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

⁷See J. Cumpsty, *Religion as Belonging: A General Theory of Religion* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991); Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*; Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion*.

⁸Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*, 3.

⁹See Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*.

¹⁰See D.M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary*, 2nd Ed. (New York: John Wiley, 1997); R. Paloutzian, *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 1996); C.G. Jung, *Man and his Symbols*. (London: Aldus, 1979); G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

The desire to overcome the disadvantages of exaggerated specialization and departmentalization by means of an integrated outlook, the desire to penetrate deeper into the nature of religious experience and the exploration of questions of an epistemological and ultimately metaphysical character.¹¹

This third stage was dominated by scholars who were theologians with philosophical background or philosophers with theological background. Some of the outstanding works associated with this period are those written by Bergson, Hugel, Soderblom, Barth and Otto.

Problematization of the Nomenclature Used

We have said that in academic circles, this field of study is known as Religious Studies, Comparative Religion, Comparative Study of Religions, Science of Religion or History of Religion. Not all of these names by which the discipline is known, are suitable names for it. Firstly, some of these are too exclusive. This is true of both "Comparative Religion" and "History of Religion." "Comparative Religion" gives the impression of only being concerned with comparing religious data from different traditions; but this discipline is a multi-disciplinary, secular study of religious data, behaviors, and institutions. Comparison is only one of many different methods applied in the study of the discipline. Other methods used in this field of knowledge include those used in humanities as well as those employed in social sciences.¹² The title "History of Religion" is also misleading: those engaged in Religious Studies include sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, phenomenologists and comparativists, many of whom have no knowledge of or interest in historiographical methods. From this it becomes clear that in the study of this discipline:

No methods are excluded whether they centre exclusively upon religion or not, whether they belong to the social sciences or the humanities, whether their approach is inductive or hermeneutic, whether they focus upon data or persons.¹³

Secondly, some of these names are too inclusive. This is true of the name "Religious Studies". When it came into being as an academic field of study, "Science of Religion" was meant to be different from theology, not only by its subject matter, but also by the methods used in studying it. The phrase "religious studies" does not exclude theology. Theology is by nature a religious discipline and is specifically classified as a branch of the broad field of knowledge generically classified as "religious studies". This already brings into question the general tendency of many universities today to have a "Department of Theology and Religious Studies," implying that theology is not, generically

¹¹Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*, 5.

¹²See Whaling, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*; Hood et al., *The Psychology of Religion*.

¹³Whaling, *Contemporary Approaches*, 25.

speaking, part of studies classified as religious studies. However, while it is true that not all religious studies are theological, all theological studies are religious. "Department of Religious Studies" is a better formulation with the understanding that the department offers both theology and other religious studies that are not necessarily theological by nature. Equally worrying is the name "Department of Theology" in cases where, in fact, the curriculum offered covers not only theology but other disciplines as well, ones which may be religious by nature, but not necessarily theological.

Whereas the names "Comparative Religion" (or Comparative Study of Religions) and "History of Religion" cannot be accepted as suitable names for the discipline in question due to their being too narrow, the name "Religious Studies" cannot be accepted as a suitable name because it is too broad. It fails to distinguish the discipline in question from theology. If theology investigates, buttresses and teaches the faith of the religious community to which it is committed, as well as rekindle zeal and fervor for the defense and spread of this faith, the discipline in question (Science of Religion) "enables us to have a fuller vision of what religious experience can mean, what forms its expression may take, and what it might do for man"¹⁴ without necessarily requiring us to be adherents of any particular faith.

With the above said, it seems that the only names appropriate for the discipline in question are "Science of Religion" and "Phenomenology of Religion". As in other cases, the word "science" derives from the methods used in the study of this discipline, which are scientific by nature. It is scientific because it shows commitment to truth and follows wherever the evidence and argument leads, regardless of the implications or consequences for religious beliefs and institutions.¹⁵ Another word used to describe a scientific study is "academic":

Academic studies of religion are not organically tied to a religious community, whereas theological ones are. Theologians function within a circle of faith. They critically examine and defend the beliefs and practices of their respective traditions. Theologians who move beyond the circle of faith may forfeit their status within the circle. Academic and theological studies both seek to inform and understand. Both approaches are concerned with clarity, evidence, and logical consistency, but, unlike the academic approach, a theological study aims at the nurturing and deepening of faith. It addresses the heart as well as the head. Theology is transformational as well as informational. It is faith seeking understanding.¹⁶

Approaches in the Study of the Discipline

There are two schools of thought regarding approaches used in Religious Studies:

One has insisted that the method of religious studies is totally *sui generis* and in no way comparable or related to methods in other fields of knowledge. The other school has

¹⁴Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*, 9.

¹⁵See R. Schmidt, *Exploring Religion* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1988).

¹⁶Schmidt, *Exploring Religion*, 20-21.

maintained that, irrespective of the character of the subject matter to be investigated, the only legitimate method is the so-called "scientific" method. The term scientific is used here in a double sense: in the narrower sense it denotes the method used in the so-called natural sciences, and in the wider sense it refers to any procedure which works with logical and coherent discipline from clearly indicated premises. Both these approaches have been found wanting; in the present era of the comparative study of religions a new synthesis is being worked out.¹⁷

Religious Studies is undertaken by scholars coming from a background of both the Humanities and the Social Sciences, resulting in a wide variety of approaches.¹⁸ Scholars coming from the perspective of the Humanities generally look at historical and philosophical angles. Strictly speaking, when the methods used in the study of religion have been limited to those used in history, we no longer have Science of Religion or Comparative Religion, but History of Religion, whose subject matter is much more narrow. The historical researcher is concerned with the identification, location, evaluation, and synthesis of data from the past. This approach involves an imaginative reconstruction of the past from the surviving data. The purpose is usually to gain a clearer understanding of the impact of the past on present and future events.¹⁹

Apart from involving the review of written material (diaries, letters, manuscripts, maps, articles, books etc.), the historical approach may also include oral documentation.²⁰ Once the researcher has collected the data, he subjects it to external and internal criticism (two types of evaluation of units of analysis). While the external criticism concerns itself with the authenticity or genuineness of the data (in order to establish the validity of the data), the internal criticism examines the accuracy of the data (in order to establish the reliability of the data). This is done in order to ensure that interpretations given are correct. Applying it in the context of the study of religion, historical approach is:

The attempt to trace the origin and growth of religious ideas and institutions through definite periods of historical development and to assess the role of the forces with which religion contended during these periods.²¹

Likewise, the use of a philosophical approach in the study of religion gives birth to Philosophy of Religion. The purpose of the philosophical approach is to do research using intellectual analysis to arrive at, for example, ultimate explanations of phenomena. Philosophical inquiry examines the most basic questions of human existence. This kind of inquiry is committed to the task of reflecting on the ideas and events that

¹⁷Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*, 14.

¹⁸See D.L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1996).

¹⁹See H. Brink, *Fundamentals of Research Methodology for Health Care Professionals* (Kenwyn: Juta, 1999).

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*, 21.

make up the cultures, societies, and traditions within which humans live and to enhance the understanding of their significance and complexity.²² In such inquiry, units of analysis are usually documents (anything ranging from books to journal articles), both published and unpublished.

Critical thinking is used to analyze philosophical data, and has both a cognitive (intellectual) and a temperamental component.²³ The cognitive component includes careful attention to meaning; a logical mapping out of possible approaches to the issue in question; and a comprehensive consideration of all possible answers in order to find the most likely-to-be-true answer.

In addition, critical thinking requires a desire to understand the issues at stake as clearly as possible. The desire to evaluate all positions fairly, without giving any preferential treatment to one's preconceived beliefs, is another aspect of a critical temperament. A good researcher is willing to follow complex or sometimes uncommon ways of reasoning, and can suspend judgment whenever it is discovered that there is no better evidence for accepting one view instead of another.²⁴

Thus, Philosophy of Religion is:

Philosophical reflection on religion by applying systematically the philosophical method. Examining critically the truth value of the immense material of myths, symbols, and rites that come from the history of religions, the philosophy of religion discovers their meaning, verifies their interrelationships and affirms their foundation. Philosophy of Religion brings a kind of rational justification to the spontaneous and existential movement of religion. Analyzing the main contents of the history of religions like the sacred, God, salvation, worship, sacrifice, prayer, ritual and symbol, the philosophy of religion determines the nature of religion and of religious experience and expression.²⁵

Anthropological, psychological and sociological approaches study religion from the point of view of the Social Sciences. These approaches gave birth to the following new disciplines, ones with a limited scope when compared to the Science of Religion: Anthropology of Religion (principally concerned with the cultural aspects of religion), Psychology of Religion (concerned with psychological principles in religious communities and practitioners) and Sociology of Religion (concerned with the social aspects of religion, both in theory and in practice). These approaches cover a fraction of what Science of Religion involves. Strictly speaking, they cannot be equated with the Science of Religion, due to their limited scope. They can only be regarded as branches of the Science of Religion although they are usually offered as part of Social Sciences due to their strict adherence to the Social Sciences methods in their approach.

²²See R. Double, *Beginning Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999); P. Reason (ed.), *Human Inquiry in Action* (London: Sage, 1988).

²³See A. Thomson, *Critical Reasoning: A Practical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996); Double, *Beginning Philosophy*.

²⁴See Double, *Beginning Philosophy*.

²⁵Dhavamony, *Phenomenology of Religion*, 6.

There is currently another approach used in the study of religion, one that Wach has referred to as a new synthesis being worked out: the phenomenological approach. Phenomenology began in the philosophical reflections of Edmund Husserl in Germany during the mid-1890s.²⁶ Husserl wanted to develop a way of experiencing and interpreting the world that was as rigorous as the mathematical model (logical positivism) of his primary education, but at the same time as open to the complexities and relativities of his reading of philosophy. He believed that much more could be known and asserted about the natural world than logical positivism would allow.²⁷ He re-instated the subject-object differentiation that was seen to be the deep flaw in logical positivism.

Phenomenology has been adopted by different disciplines to explore research questions which lead to knowledge different from that generated through the use of positivist approaches. A good example of such knowledge would be a study on human experience. When it comes to understanding human experience, the separation between researcher and researched, between subject and object, is a fiction.²⁸ Experience and the meaning attributed to experience are not immediately observable and accessible to a true/false kind of analysis generally associated with a positivist framework.

In phenomenology, human experience is examined through the descriptions provided by the people involved. Phenomenologists are interested in addressing, identifying, describing, understanding and interpreting the experiences people have in their day-to-day lives. Thus, phenomenology concentrates on the actual experience of the subject, rather than on subjects or objects. The focus is on what is happening in the life of the individual, what is important about the experience and what changes can be introduced. Phenomenologists investigate experiences of life events and the meaning these events have to the people experiencing them.²⁹

The phenomenological approach is based on two premises. The first is that experience is a valid, rich, and rewarding source of knowledge, as well as the source of all knowing and the basis of behavior. What people are aware of, at any point in time, is the foundation of their knowledge of themselves, of other people, and the world in general. Without human experience, the human world would be impossible. The second premise of phenomenological approach lies in the view that our everyday world is a valuable and productive source of knowledge, and that human beings can learn much about themselves and reap key insights into the nature of an event by analyzing how it occurs in their daily lives.³⁰

²⁶See E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

²⁷See Brink, *Fundamentals of Research Methodology*; M. C. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 2nd Ed. (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990).

²⁸See Brink, *Fundamentals*.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

By concentrating on experience in the lived world rather than on traditional empirico-analytical research, phenomenologists depart from the philosophical assumptions inherent in the positivist models of research which state that scientific methods of measuring behavior ensure objectivity and that researchers do not influence their findings. The purpose of a phenomenological approach is to uncover the nature of experience, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the individual's perception.

In the phenomenological approach, when analyzing data the researcher must follow what is called "bracketing" and "intuiting". The former is the process of identifying and setting aside any preconceived ideas, beliefs and opinions one might have about a phenomenon under investigation.³¹ In other words, the researcher brackets out the world and any preconceived ideas so as to avoid a biased consideration of issues.

"Intuiting" refers to a situation where the researcher focuses on the lived experience of the subject without forcing prior expectations or knowledge in the process. Through intuiting, the researcher becomes totally immersed in the phenomenon under investigation and he/she begins to know the phenomenon as described by the participants.³²

The use of phenomenological methods in the study of religion has given birth to what is today known as Phenomenology of Religion. The Phenomenology of Religion should arguably be seen more as another name for the Science of Religion than as a new field of study. Apart from the fact that in it, religious issues or data studied are dealt with using a phenomenological approach (which is one of the scientific approaches), the subject matter of the Phenomenology of Religion is also of the same nature and scope as that covered by the Science of Religion.

The phenomenology of religion has been developed by Max Scheler, Rudolf Otto, Jean Hering, and Gerardus van der Leeuw. Its aim is to view religious ideas, acts, and institutions with due consideration to their "intention," yet without subscribing to any one philosophical, theological, metaphysical, or psychological theory. Thus a necessary supplement to a purely historical, psychological, or sociological approach is provided.³³

Issues in the Study of Religious Studies

Issues in the study of Religious Studies range from the reality of religious experience (a response to what is experienced as the Ultimate Reality) to the expression of that experience in thought (intellectual expression of religious experience through myths, doctrine, dogma, sacred writings, confessions of faith, and creeds), in action (devotion and service) and in fellowship (rites and rituals performed communally).

³¹Ibid.

³²See F.C.L. Rakotsoane & M.A. Rakotsoane, *The ABC of Research Project, Dissertation and Thesis Proposal Writing* (Roma: Choice Publishing Company, 2006).

³³Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*, 24.

Time and space do not allow us to discuss all of these in this chapter. Below is a discussion of one issue (defining religion) whose omission in any study of religion renders that study inadequate.

Defining Religion

Religion is a pervasive and almost universal phenomenon in human societies. Yet one of the striking facts about the word 'religion' is that, although we use it without hesitation, we find it very difficult to tell others what we mean by it.³⁴

"What is religion?" is one question no serious study of religion can avoid. It is a *sine qua non* of every study of religion. Religion is also, as we have seen above, such an enormously rich and diversified phenomenon that its study and definition is correspondingly diverse. Many believe that the word comes from the Latin *religare*, which means to tie or to bind, as religion brings people together as a community of believers. Others, such as Cicero, trace the origin of the word to another Latin word, *relegere*, which means to read over again. This understanding is probably influenced by a routine and ritualistic way of doing things in religion.

Academic literature is filled with many but unhelpful attempts to describe and define religion. For example:

BERGER, Peter: "The human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established."

DURKHEIM Emile: "A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things."

FRAZER, James: "A propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct or control the course of nature and human life."

HEGEL, George: "The knowledge possessed by the finite mind of its nature as absolute mind."

JAMES, William: "The BELIEF that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."

KANT, Immanuel: "The recognition of all our duties as divine commands."

MARX, Karl: "The self-conscious and self-feeling of man who has either not found himself or has already lost himself again ... the general theory of the world ... its logic in a popular form ... its moral sanction, its solemn completion, its universal ground for consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence..."

SCHLEIERMACHER, Friedrich: "A feeling for the infinite" and "a feeling of absolute dependence."

SMART, Ninian: "A set of institutionalized rituals with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines."

STARK, Rodney: "Any socially organized pattern of beliefs and practices concerning ultimate meaning that assumes the existence of the supernatural."

WHITEHEAD, Alfred North: "What the individual does with his own solitariness."

³⁴G.L. Abernethy and T.A. Langford, *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), 1.

WEBER, Max: "To say what it is, is not possible ... the essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behaviour."³⁵

A closer look at many of these definitions reveals that they tend to suffer from one of two problems: they are either too exclusive and fail to apply to many belief systems which most people agree are religions, or they are too vague and ambiguous, suggesting that just about anything and everything can be a religion. A better way to work towards finding an adequate or suitable definition of religion is to identify basic characteristics common to all religions. Some of such characteristics may be shared with other belief systems, but taken together they make religion distinguishable.

Once such characteristics have been established, the next factor to pay attention to is the nature of a good definition: Firstly, a good definition should "be neither too inclusive nor too exclusive..."³⁶ A definition becomes too inclusive when it makes it possible for anything to qualify as religion. An example would be to define religion as "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith" (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary). Anything considered important in human life has a possibility of being held to with ardor and faith. Does that turn it into religion? Surely not! A definition is considered too exclusive when it fails to accommodate in its scope all other religious traditions generally regarded as religions in their own right. One example would be to define religion as belief in the existence of God. Such definition cannot be applied to non-theistic religions in which the concept of God is non-existent or is peripheral to their central belief system.

Secondly, a good definition should explain religion in terms of features fundamental to religion. For example, all religions are grounded on the belief that there is more to life than appears on the surface, that there is something holy that transcends and empowers the transformation of ordinary existence. Also, all religions maintain the belief that human existence, if it is to be fulfilled, must be harmonized with or subordinated in faith to that which humans experience as "holy" or "sacred". The holy or the sacred here should be understood as, to use St. Anselm's expression, "that beyond which nothing greater can be conceived", that is, that which is ultimately real. The ultimately real is defined by Cumpsty as that to which the individual most feels the need to belong in order that life might have meaning, security, warmth or be otherwise enriched.³⁷ Depending on the nature of a given religion, this may be God, a group of gods, or spirits personally involved in the life of human beings (as in the case of theistic religions); it might be an impersonal power, a process, a state of being or an eternal truth capable of influencing human existence (as in the case of non-theistic religions). Keeping the above in mind, we may now define religion as a *spiritual observance of*

³⁵University of Calgary, "Irving Hexham's Concise Dictionary of Religion", InterVarsity Press, <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~nurelweb/concise/WORDS-R.html>.

³⁶Schmidt, *Exploring Religion*, 10.

³⁷Cumpsty, *Religion as Belonging*, 159.

submitting, in faith, human life to that to which the individual most feels the need to belong, in order that life might have meaning, security, warmth, fulfillment or be otherwise enriched. The word “spiritual” has been included in the definition in order to denote that religion is an activity that primarily takes care of the spiritual dimension of humankind. The word “observance” has been used to indicate a routine way of doing things in religion. Likewise, the word “faith” has been used to distinguish religion from some empirical human practices (e.g. communism, Scientology, etc.) which are at times mistaken for religion. Strictly speaking, these are not religion, but human philosophies.

Conclusion

One thing clear from the foregoing discussion is the fact that different scholars seem to fail to make a necessary distinction between a general scientific study of religious issues known as Science of Religion and various disciplines which are only interested in specific aspects of the study of religion. As a result of this, many of them have used such nomenclatures as Comparative Study of Religion and History of Religions to refer to the said general study of religious issues. These two nomenclatures do not do justice to the discipline in question. They limit its scope. Likewise, the use of the nomenclature, Religious Studies does not help because it fails to distinguish this area of study from Theology which, like it is religious by nature, but differs from it in terms of its scope and method of approach.

In the light of the above, Science of Religion appears to be the only nomenclature that is arguably appropriate for the said general scientific study of religion. Other related disciplines such as Sociology of Religion, Psychology of Religion, Anthropology of Religion and Philosophy of Religion are to be seen more as branches of the Science of Religion than as parallel disciplines. The name “Science of Religion” is neither too inclusive nor too exclusive, but captures adequately all that which the discipline in question is about without implying the inclusion of theology in its scope as does the name “Religious Studies” or implying the exclusion of other aspects of religion as do such names as History of Religion, Philosophy of Religion, Anthropology of Religion, Psychology of Religion and Sociology of Religion.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Phenomenology of Religion

Ezra Chitando

Introduction

Despite the availability of different approaches,¹ phenomenology of religion has been quite popular in the academic study of religion. This is particularly true of the study of religion in Africa. Many departments of religious studies in Africa offer phenomenology of religion as a course, especially to students who are in their first year at university. For some scholars, phenomenology of religion is an alternative term for religious studies.

This chapter seeks to examine the phenomenology of religion. The first section provides a description of its historical development. The second section examines key concepts in the phenomenology of religion. The third section outlines its popularity in Africa. The fourth section examines emerging discussions concerning the phenomenology of religion. The conclusion offers some reflections on how phenomenology of religion could be strengthened.

The Historical Development of Phenomenology of Religion

The term “phenomenology of religion” has generated a lot of controversy. Scholars who use this term do not always agree on its precise meaning. This is understandable as the term is the result of bringing together two difficult concepts, namely, “phenomenology” and “religion.” Each term has a long history. “Phenomenology” has been used in both philosophy and religious studies. This results in a major debate: is phenomenology in philosophy the same as phenomenology in religious studies? Scholars have taken diverse positions in response to this question. Those who maintain that there is an unbroken chain between philosophical phenomenology and phenomenology of religion form one category. Another category is that of scholars who argue that there is no direct relationship between phenomenology in philosophy and phenomenology of reli-

¹Peter Connolly, ed., *Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999).

gion.² I shall return to this debate after discussing in forthcoming paragraphs the rise of the phenomenology of religion.

The difficulties associated with the term “phenomenology” are fewer than those associated with the term “religion.” Responses to the question, “what is religion?” are as varied as the number of respondents. People tend to define religion in accordance with their own ideas of what religion is, and what it should be. Those who believe in God tend to restrict religion to a belief in God. People who feel that religion is not useful will define religion negatively. What is clear is that there is no universal definition of religion. It is difficult for scholars to develop a comprehensive definition because there are so many religions in the world. How does one find a common label for diverse beliefs and practices?³

The combination of two contested concepts has ensured that the term “phenomenology of religion” is the subject of considerable scholarly disagreement, as I have outlined above. However, it is possible to identify some of the key personalities who have contributed to the shaping of the discipline. Although it would require a longer essay to do justice to the origins of phenomenology of religion, it is possible to locate it within the context of the development of religious studies in Europe. One can therefore argue that the rise of phenomenology of religion is tied to the quest to develop a scientific and reliable approach to the study of religion. However, before examining the application of the term “phenomenology” in religious studies, it is necessary to analyse how it has been used in philosophy.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher, is often identified as the person who provided the most elaborate reflections on phenomenology. Although he was not the first philosopher to apply this concept, he popularised the notion of phenomenology. It is important to highlight Husserl’s ideas concerning phenomenology since many phenomenologists of religion have adopted them. According to Gavin Flood:

Although the phenomenology of religion predates Husserl, he is nevertheless of central importance in its development, for it is to Husserl that it owes its three most analytical concepts, namely bracketing (*epoche*), the eidetic reduction and empathy (*einfühlung*).⁴

Husserl’s project needs to be understood against the background of one of the key questions in philosophy: how do we attain knowledge of external reality? This question has intrigued philosophers. How do I know anything other than my own existence? What are the techniques that I need to adopt in order to know external objects?

²Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 109.

³James L. Cox, *Expressing the Sacred: An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1993).

⁴Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), 92.

For example, how can I claim to know that other people, cattle, trees, animals and other objects exist? Husserl sought to formulate what he felt were key principles in this search for knowledge.

Husserl was convinced that philosophers need to analyse phenomena, that is, anything that is perceived by the senses. The term phenomena is derived from the Greek word *phainomai*, that is, “that which manifests itself.” Husserl argued that phenomenology is the study of experiences that result from the consciousness of external objects. It is important to note that Husserl places emphasis on consciousness. For him, the existence of the object in reality is not as important as the fact that it is registered in human consciousness. According to him, there is need for the *epoche* (bracketing) in order for the observer to approach the phenomena with his or her consciousness clear.

He called for a return “to the things themselves”.⁵ For Husserl, a return to the data was crucial as some philosophers were engaging in speculation. Philosophers needed to approach phenomena in a fresh way. This entailed bracketing (*epoche*), identifying the essence of the phenomena (eidetic reduction) and empathy for the object under investigation.

Husserl’s ideas have been utilised by many phenomenologists of religion. James L. Cox argues that “as the phenomenology of religion developed in the twentieth century, Husserl’s philosophy must be regarded as one of its major formative influences, alongside theology and the social sciences”.⁶ However, it must be noted that phenomenologists of religion do not always wish to concentrate on the philosophical issues that Husserl focused on. Rather they appreciate his emphasis on the need to bracket previous biases and the need for empathy. Thus:

Many scholars, recognized to be phenomenologists of religion, have been trained first as historians of religion and not as philosophers. Many would also understand history of religions and phenomenology of religion to be complimentary and interchangeable undertakings, so closely related that they would be hard pressed to distinguish between the two. Such phenomenologists of religion frequently admit to having no more than a surface understanding of Husserl’s fundamental contentions.⁷

Scholars like W. Brede Kristensen (1867-1953), a Norwegian who taught in the Netherlands, Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950), C. J. Bleeker (1898-1983) and Mircea Eliade contributed to the phenomenology of religion. They sought to describe religion objectively, and tried to avoid imposing judgments on religion. These scholars also

⁵See for example Arvind Sharma, *To the Things Themselves: Essays on the Discourse and Practice of the Phenomenology of Religion* (New York: Gruyter, 2001).

⁶James L. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences and Subsequent Debates* (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 9-10.

⁷Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies...*, 109.

endeavoured to be sympathetic towards followers of the religions that they described. Jacques Waardenburg,⁸ Eric J. Sharpe⁹ and G. A. James¹⁰ have provided useful studies on the growth of the phenomenology of religion.

Key Concepts in the Phenomenology of Religion

The phenomenology of religion puts emphasis on a number of key concepts. These concepts provide it with a certain level of coherence. One of the most important concepts in the phenomenology of religion is *epoche*. It means, “I hold back”.¹¹ As discussed above, the term is derived from Husserl. In the academic study of religion, it is used to encourage researchers to “hold back” or to put in brackets their own biases, assumptions and values when studying the religions of others. It is a technique that seeks to empower scholars of religion to study other people’s religions without prejudice.

Epoche

Epoche is a powerful concept in that it encourages researchers and scholars of religion to approach all religions with open minds. It is particularly crucial in the study of African Traditional Religions. Other scholars also refer to these religions as African Indigenous Religions or African Religion. The study of African Traditional Religions was dominated by Europeans in the early phase. European travellers, traders, missionaries, anthropologists and others provided the earliest descriptions of African Traditional Religions.¹² However, since most of these writers regarded Christianity as “the” true religion, they tended to use negative terms to describe African Traditional Religions. African Traditional Religions were described as primitive, backward, savage, superstition and animism.¹³ One of the leading authorities on the academic study of African Traditional Religions, John S. Mbiti, argues that in the nineteenth century foreign writers provided their domestic audiences with information on African Tradi-

⁸Jacques Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods and Theories of Research* Vol. 1. Introduction and Anthology (The Hague: Mouton, 1973).

⁹Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 1975).

¹⁰G. A. James, *Interpreting Religion: The Phenomenological Approaches of Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, W. Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus van der Leeuw* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

¹¹See for example Ezra Chitando, “The Phenomenological Method in a Zimbabwean Context: To Liberate or to Oppress?” *Zambezia* 25(1) (1998): 99-114.

¹²Frieder Ludwig and Afe Adogame, eds., *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004).

¹³Okot p’Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1971).

tional Religions. However, their descriptions were coloured by pure arrogance, racial prejudice and insufficient knowledge.¹⁴

One could argue that earlier European writers on African Traditional Religions did not perform *epoche*. They did not put into brackets their assumptions about the superiority of European religion and culture over African religion and culture. They allowed their preconceived ideas and prejudice to influence their descriptions of African Traditional Religions. *Epoche* cultivates an attitude of openness to the phenomena of religion. A researcher attempts to erase her or his ideas about true or false religion. Descriptions of African Traditional Religions as “devil worship” indicate failure to approach African Traditional Religions as legitimate religions in their own right.

It is important to point out that the tendency to readily judge the religious beliefs and practices of others is not confined to earlier European writers on African Traditional Religions. Every researcher is susceptible to this tendency. It is natural to approach the world using our own values. The process of socialisation that we undergo as we grow up conditions us to regard certain beliefs and practices as “right” or “wrong.” However, phenomenologists of religion maintain that researchers need to step back and put such beliefs in brackets. This will enable them to appreciate the phenomena afresh.

As members of the community, scholars of religion have certain attitudes towards religious beliefs and practices. For example, some scholars may feel that female circumcision (also referred to as female genital mutilation or female genital cutting) is an infringement on the rights of women. However, such scholars need to put their own evaluation of female circumcision in brackets and seek to understand why many women appear to be willing to undergo the ritual. If the researcher approaches the topic with preconceived ideas, s/he might not be able to see the different perspectives on the practice.

Epoche is also meant to assist researchers to avoid making distinctions between “true” and “false” religions. A good example might be seen in the study of contemporary Judaism. As far as most people are concerned, “real Judaism” is practised by white people. To a very large extent, Judaism is associated with a particular racial group, that is, the whites. However, when studying a group of Africans who claim to be members of Judaism, a researcher needs to perform *epoche*. S/He must desist from passing judgement on the integrity of African Judaism.¹⁵ The researcher should not assume that there is a “legitimate form” of Judaism, while dismissing African Judaism. Phenomenology of religion encourages scholars of religion to approach all religious phenomena without bias and prejudice.

¹⁴John S. Mbiti, “Challenges Facing Religious Education and Research in Africa: The Case of Dialogue between Christianity and African Religion,” *Religion and Theology* 3(2) (1996): 170.

¹⁵Ezra Chitando, “Studying African Judaism: Methodological Challenges,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 18(2) (2005): 55-74.

Ninian Smart, a British phenomenologist of religion, used the term “methodological agnosticism” to refer to *epoche*. For Smart, methodological agnosticism means that researchers neither affirm nor deny the existence of the gods that followers of religions claim to exist.¹⁶ The scholar of religion puts such issues in brackets. An agnostic is someone who says, “I do not know” when asked whether or not God exists. Similarly, for methodological purposes, scholars of religion are encouraged to adopt the position of agnosticism when investigating religious phenomena. They do not comment on the existence of non-human phenomena like gods and spirits.

The foregoing paragraphs have highlighted the importance of *epoche* to the academic study of religions. *Epoche* potentially liberates researchers from imposing their own views on religious phenomena. It allows religious phenomena to “speak for themselves” with minimum interruption. As Husserl argued, *epoche* allows the investigator to go back “to the things themselves”. The phenomenological technique of *epoche* has assisted scholars from different cultures to understand religions that have emerged from other cultural contexts. However, there has been considerable debate over the possibility and value of performing *epoche*.

One of the major criticisms levelled at the concept of *epoche* is that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate bias. Phenomenologists of religion have been accused of promoting *epoche* without giving an outline of how one actually puts the concept into practice. Simply put, the question is: how does one perform *epoche*? Is it by training? If so, what kind of training? When and how does a researcher know that s/he has successfully performed *epoche*? Can two phenomenologists of religion achieve *epoche* to the same degree?

The questions regarding *epoche* outlined above highlight the challenges associated with the concept. As products of their particular societies, scholars of religion have their own values, biases and assumptions. It is difficult to eliminate or minimise these factors as most of them are internalised and are held unconsciously. Phenomenologists of religion have not provided guidelines regarding how to perform *epoche*. “Absence of the means” has emerged as one of the most significant criticisms levelled against *epoche*. Michael F. C. Bourdillon, a Zimbabwean anthropologist, argues:

Perhaps the notion of *epoche* has now passed its usefulness. It too easily lends credence to the delusion that you can eliminate your own personal bias when you try to understand other people.¹⁷

We need to distinguish between an open mind and an empty mind. The only way to be totally without prejudice is to be, like an infant, totally without knowledge. The way

¹⁶James L. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion*..., 160.

¹⁷Michael F. C. Bourdillon, “Anthropological Approaches to the Study of African Religion,” in *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects*, eds. Jan Platvoet, James Cox and Jacob Olupona (Cambridge: Roots and Branches, 1996), 148.

to move forwards in knowledge is not to remove or discard what we already know, but to use this in such a way that we do not impede progress to new knowledge and new perceptions. Rather than trying to stifle our previous knowledge, we should be admitting it, examining it, and constantly trying to see its limitations.¹⁸

Bourdillon's critique questions the applicability of *epoche*. This raises a second, valuable observation regarding *epoche*. This relates to the issue of whether it is even desirable to desist from passing judgement on the phenomena of religion. Why should scholars of religion refrain from evaluating religious beliefs and practices? Do they not have a duty to the public and to their professions to provide balanced evaluation of religious beliefs and practices? For example, should African scholars of religion not evaluate religions when in many instances religious beliefs have been responsible for violence, gender injustice, and HIV and AIDS?¹⁹ Some critics have charged that *epoche* is not a valuable concept as it might discourage scholars of religion from becoming relevant to the needs to their communities.

Cultivating Empathy

Alongside the concept of *epoche*, phenomenologists of religion have encouraged scholars of religion to cultivate empathy towards the religious individuals and communities that they will be studying. The major argument for promoting an empathetic understanding of religion is that the focus of religious studies is fellow human beings. Unlike other disciplines that tend to concentrate on inanimate objects, the study of religion dwells on human beings, who have emotions and feelings of their own. The duty of the scholar of religion is to respect these feelings and emotions.

Phenomenologists of religion have used such arguments to encourage researchers to "feel for and feel with" adherents of the religions that they will be studying. Phenomenology of religion recommends "methodological conversion" to facilitate an understanding of the religion under study. It must be reiterated that the "conversion" that the scholar undergoes is for the purposes of research only. S/He does not become an adherent of the religion that s/he is studying. Crucially, the concept of empathy works hand in hand with that of *epoche*. It is when the scholar is bracketing his or her bias and prejudice that empathy should be cultivated. James L. Cox writes:

Understanding is achieved through the process of empathy whereby the scientist endeavours to see as a believer sees by temporarily applying *epoche* to his own personal, cultural or academic assumptions. This process must be temporary because the observer will return to the assumptions entailed in the scientific method when the analysis of the data observed occurs. The stage of empathy undertaken in the mode of temporary brack-

¹⁸Michael F. C. Bourdillon, "Anthropological Approaches to the Study of African Religion...", 148.

¹⁹Ezra Chitando, "Beyond Phenomenology: Teaching African Traditional Religions in a Zimbabwean University," *Zimbabwe Journal of Educational Research* 13(2) (2001): 177-195.

eting is intended to ensure that what actually is analyzed proceeds from the believers' perspectives and thus is as true as possible to the phenomena of the religious community under study.²⁰

Scholars of religion are encouraged to be fully immersed in the religious beliefs and practices of the communities they are studying. They must overcome the distance between themselves and the focus of their research. In addition, phenomenologists of religion promote participant-observation. This involves the researcher participating in rituals and ceremonies in the process of gathering data. The researcher does not become aloof and too far-removed from the believers. Phenomenologists of religion argue that viewing reality from the point of view of the believers goes a long way in ensuring that the researcher remains close to the phenomena of religion.

The cultivation of empathy is meant to assist the researcher to gain inside knowledge about a particular religion. It seeks to overcome the insider/outsider tension in the study of religion.²¹ This is a major challenge in religious studies. How can a scholar who does not belong to a particular religion provide scientific and reliable data about that religion? This question has dominated the academic study of African Traditional Religions. African scholars have argued that they are better qualified to write on African Traditional Religions because they are "insiders." They charge that European scholars are "outsiders" and do not accurately represent indigenous religions.²² Phenomenologists of religion prescribe the cultivation of empathy to overcome the "outsider" status of researchers. They argue that if the researcher enters into the life experiences of the believers, s/he would be well positioned to represent their beliefs and practices accurately.

Like *epoche*, cultivating empathy has its own strengths and weaknesses. The major weakness is related to the one surrounding *epoche*: how to put the technique into practice. The researcher has his or her own cultural background. S/he may find it difficult to view reality from the point of view of the believers, even temporarily. If a scholar does not believe in the reality of witchcraft, for example, how can s/he fully understand the fear of witchcraft by members of the community under study? If a researcher does not believe in faith or miraculous healing, can s/he do justice to a healing session?

Apart from the practical challenges associated with cultivating empathy, other critics charge that the technique is not scientific: if scholars of religion are interested in collecting scientific data about religion, they should follow strict scientific proce-

²⁰James L. Cox, "Methodological Considerations Relevant to Understanding African Indigenous Religions," in *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects*, eds. Jan Platvoet, James Cox and Jacob Olupona (Cambridge: Roots and Branches, 1996), 166.

²¹See, for example, Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1999).

²²Ezra Chitando, "'Insiders' and 'Outsiders' in the Study of African Traditional Religions: One More Time!" *Missionalia* 29(1) (2001): 43-54.

dures. Science is a detached and systematic discipline. The cultivation of empathy violates the recommended distance between the subject and the object, according to those who oppose the cultivation of empathy. On their part, phenomenologists of religion maintain that the study of religion is different from the other sciences. As a result, many have promoted the cultivation of empathy.

Accurate Naming and Description of Religious Phenomena

The phenomenology of religion places emphasis on the need for researchers to use neutral categories when describing religious phenomena. It enjoins scholars of religion to avoid pejorative and loaded terms. These are terms that tend to evaluate in the process of describing. Some writers have used negative terms to describe traditional African beliefs and practices. These include terms like “pre-literate religions”, “superstition”, “pre-logical” and others. Phenomenology of religion encourages researchers to avoid such terms. Scholars must utilise concepts that do not conflict with the believers’ own understanding of their religion.

One of the most popular slogans in the phenomenology of religion is: “the believer is always right.” Kristensen coined the saying, alongside insisting that the primary focus of the study of religion is the faith of the believer.²³ Phenomenology of religion maintains that adherents of a particular religion should see themselves truthfully reflected in the descriptions of the researcher. When this is violated, the researcher has failed in his or her endeavour. Proponents of this stance argue that followers of a religion should endorse the descriptions of their beliefs and practices.

There is considerable merit in phenomenology of religion’s emphasis on the believer’s point of view and the need for accurate terminology. Scholars of religion need to respect the believers and refrain from using concepts that are offensive. Surely, no believer would accept descriptions that give the impression that their religion is inferior and less sophisticated. Neither would they endorse the idea that their religion is “simple”. Scholars of religion have the responsibility to treat the religions of others with the utmost respect.

Critics of phenomenology argue that placing too much emphasis on the point of view of the believer is a deviation from the ideal of scientific accuracy. Donald Wiebe argues that seeking endorsement from believers implies that the scholar of religion is at the mercy of the believers.²⁴ For Wiebe, this is a major setback as it forces the study of religion back to theology. Theology seeks to promote faith within a particular religious tradition. Wiebe contends that when scholars of religion defer to the opinions of believers, they are promoting theology, and not the academic study of religion. Believers should not hold scholars of religion hostage, critics maintain.

²³Richard J. Plantinga, “W. B. Kristensen and the Study of Religion,” *Religion* 36(2) (1989): 173-188.

²⁴Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 65.

It is also debatable whether the emphasis on the believers' point of view results in objective data on religion. Within any particular religion, believers may actually have different versions of the key beliefs and practices. In most instances, there are debates regarding the "correct" beliefs and practices. The history of religions shows that there have been divisions within the world's religions over doctrinal issues. When adherents of a particular religion do not agree amongst themselves, how can the scholar identify those who are "right"? When there are disagreements between religious leaders and followers over doctrines, how does the scholar of religion choose between the competing ideas? Such problematic issues highlight the challenge of placing emphasis on the point of view of the believer.

Irreducibility of Religion

Phenomenology of religion insists that religion is *sui generis*, unique, irreducible and a discipline in its own right. This assertion seeks to separate religion and its study from other disciplines. Phenomenology of religion argues that disciplines like psychology and sociology do not do justice to the uniqueness of religion. As a result, there is considerable debate between religious studies and the social sciences. In arguing that religion is *sui generis*, phenomenology of religion is drawing attention to the idea that there are phenomena that are distinctively religious. They are not to be categorised as something else. Consequently, there is a need for a specific discipline, like phenomenology, to do justice to religion. Cox writes:

For van der Leeuw, therefore, the phenomenology of religion can be said to constitute an academic discipline in its own right, one that is entirely distinguishable from all other disciplines concerned with the study of religion. It should not be confused with methods peculiar to history, philosophy, aesthetics, psychology or theology. On this account, phenomenology can best be described as fully *sui generis*, utterly irreducible to any other scholarly methodology.²⁵

Other scholars within phenomenology of religion, such as Eliade, have emphasised the uniqueness of religion. They argue that religion is a special discipline that requires a special methodology. To a very large extent, this has been a reaction to the tendency by social scientific approaches to reduce religion. Often, sociologists and psychologists have "explained away" religion. Sociologists have tended to explain religion in terms of social interaction. They explain religion in terms of social factors. For example, in trying to account for the rise of Pentecostalism in Africa, some scholars have argued that Pentecostalism provides converts with a sense of meaning in a difficult socio-economic context. Paul Gifford has explained the popularity of Ghana's Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches in terms of the deteriorating economic conditions brought about by the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme in that country.²⁶

²⁵J. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion...*, 125.

²⁶Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London: C. Hurst & Co.), 2004.

Similarly, David Maxwell argues that his study illustrates how the economic turmoil in Zimbabwe draws people into the Pentecostal community. He writes:

The core of the analysis centres upon a lexicon of key words, phrases and narratives drawn from Pentecostal music, preaching, testimony and prayer. It shows Pentecostalism as a quintessentially popular religion, able to satisfy existential passions and to aid those struggling for survival. In particular, it demonstrates how Pentecostal religion addresses the personal sense of abjection created by shattered hopes of independence, and offers security in the face of state retrenchment, the capriciousness of global capitalism and growing levels of violence and crime. Beyond providing them with security, the Pentecostal community captures adherents and offers them stability and hope as they strive toward something better.²⁷

Scholars who uphold the phenomenology of religion would argue that Maxwell's interpretation of the popularity of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe in the foregoing citation does not capture the essence of Pentecostalism. They would contend that he has dwelt on the external factors, without penetrating the inner core of Pentecostalism and its popularity in Zimbabwe. Maxwell's explanation focuses on psychological and sociological factors, without identifying the religious factors that make Pentecostalism so attractive. In phenomenological terms, Maxwell is guilty of reductionism. He has missed out on the distinctively religious quality of Pentecostalism. Scholars who uphold the phenomenology of religion would argue that there are religious factors that are responsible for the popularity of Pentecostalism. Researchers have an obligation to identify these religious factors, instead of reducing the phenomenon of Pentecostalism to psychological and sociological factors.

From the foregoing example, it is clear that the notion that religious phenomena are irreducible is quite valuable. It reminds researchers that there are phenomena that belong to the category of the religious. Reducing these phenomena to psychological, sociological or other categories does not do justice to them. Although sociological approaches to the study of religion place emphasis on the social context within which the drama of religion is played out,²⁸ they tend to downplay the religious dimensions. Similarly, psychological approaches to the study of religion often do not give due consideration to the religious aspects of phenomena under investigation. They concentrate on the psychological dimension. Phenomenology of religion insists that the religious character of phenomena needs to receive maximum attention.

However, the idea that religious phenomena are irreducible faces a number of challenges. To begin with, the problem of identifying or defining religious phenomena needs to be appreciated. How can scholars who defend the concept of the irreducibility of religious phenomena uphold this stance when they do not isolate the so-

²⁷David Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism and the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religion* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2006), 185.

²⁸Michael F. C. Bourdillon, *Religion and Society: A Text for Africa* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1990).

called religious phenomena satisfactorily? If religious phenomena are embedded in sociological and psychological phenomena, how can they be disentangled? How do phenomenologists of religion identify the irreducible phenomena, and characterise them as religious?

Second, the idea of irreducibility would make the study of religion an inaccessible discipline. Critics argue that it takes religious studies outside the scope of scientific disciplines. Timothy Fitzgerald has argued that the doctrine of irreducibility is a cover up for theological commitments on the part of scholars of religion.²⁹ This critique is significant as the academic study of religion has consistently sought to separate itself from theology. The academic study of religion portrays itself as a scientific discipline. However, critics wonder why it is willing to grant religion such a special status. What makes religion so unique and “untouchable”? Is the concept of irreducibility a tacit way of preserving religion’s mysterious quality, as phenomenologists of religion have described it?

Third, the idea of irreducibility of religion prevents the emergence of harmonising different approaches to the study of religion. It is possible to regard historical, sociological, psychological and phenomenological approaches as different methods that allow scholars to have a rounded picture of religion. The underlying conviction is that “different dimensions of a religious phenomenon require insights from particular perspectives.”³⁰ By insisting that religion is unique, phenomenology of religion potentially rules out the applicability of other approaches to the study of religion. Alternatively, phenomenology of religion would be declaring that it is the most appropriate or superior approach to the study of religion.

The Essence of Religion

Alongside arguing that religion is unique and irreducible, some scholars within the phenomenology of religion maintain that it is desirable for researchers to establish the essence of religion. Following van der Leeuw’s notion of the eidetic vision or reduction, they argue that there is a core of religion that the researcher can identify. This would be the heart of religion. For example, Martin Prozesky, a South African scholar of religion, identified the quest for ultimate well-being as the core concern of religion.³¹

Scholars who uphold phenomenological principles argue that researchers can suspend their biases (*epoche*) and identify the essence of religion. The eidetic intuition or vision establishes the core of religion, according to some phenomenologists of religion. This strand within the phenomenology of religion has been identified as

²⁹Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³⁰Ezra Chitando, *Singing Culture: A Study of Gospel Music in Zimbabwe* Research Report No. 121. (Uppsala: Nordiska Africainstitutet, 2002), 10.

³¹Martin Prozesky, *Religion and Ultimate Well-Being: An Explanatory Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

the essentialist voice. It contends that the various aspects of religion can be brought together to establish the essence of religion.

The idea of the eidetic vision appeals to some scholars who seek to find the inner meaning or core of religion. It gives religion some sense of unity, instead of appearing so loose. However, critics question whether this “essence” of religion is empirically testable. Can two different researchers identify the same essence of religion? How do they know when they are successful, and when they are not successful? For some critics, this dimension of the phenomenology of religion is unscientific.

The foregoing paragraphs have discussed the key concepts within the phenomenology of religion. As the introduction states, there is no unanimity amongst scholars regarding the identity of the phenomenology of religion. However, it is likely that most researchers within the field would accept the characteristics described above as constituting the major traits of the phenomenology of religion. In the following section, the chapter discusses the popularity of the phenomenology of religion in Africa.

Phenomenology of Religion in Africa

The phenomenology of religion developed as an approach to the study of religion in Europe and North America. Most of the established practitioners of the discipline have been scholars based at universities in Europe and North America. However, the phenomenology of religion has found enthusiastic supporters in Africa, even as its status has come under fire in Europe and North America. Introductory courses in religious studies in some African universities adopt a phenomenological approach.³² The key motivation in adopting phenomenological principles in the study of religion in Africa is that scholars feel that these principles do justice to the reality of religious pluralism on the continent.

Phenomenology of religion is popular in Africa because it allows scholars to teach all religions of the world, without favouring some religions and ignoring others. Its emphasis on neutrality, respect and accuracy appeals to many African scholars. In particular, the study of African Traditional Religions benefits from the application of phenomenological principles. As was discussed in the section on *epoche*, African Traditional Religions have suffered from biased accounts and reports by “outsiders”. African scholars feel that phenomenological principles will go a long way in reducing the challenges that have characterised the discipline.³³ They are convinced that phenomenological principles help to liberate African Traditional Religions from distortion and misrepresentation. By placing emphasis on the point of view of the believers, phenomenology of religion allows adherents of these religions to speak for themselves.

³²Peter McKenzie, “The History of Religions in Africa,” in *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Pye (Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1989), 99–105.

³³Ezra Chitando, “Phenomenology of Religion and the Study of African Traditional Religions,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 17(4) (2005): 301.

The phenomenology of religion is also popular in Africa because it facilitates a comparative study of the three main religions of Africa, namely, African Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam. Although there are numerous religions on the continent, these three are the most dominant. The comparative dimension of phenomenology is attractive to scholars of religion in Africa. It allows them to analyse themes that are common to the three religions. These include responses to HIV and AIDS, attitudes to nature, the status of women and other themes. Phenomenology of religion enables non-evaluative comparison of religious phenomena across the different religions.

Alongside its value for teaching purposes, phenomenology of religion provides very helpful research techniques to African students. Many departments of religious studies and theology in Africa require their students to write long essays or dissertations based on fieldwork. With HIV and AIDS causing untold suffering, some students have carried out investigations into the role of religion in the overall response to the epidemic. Such studies require openness and empathy, tools that are provided by the phenomenology of religion. The approach also calls for accuracy and sensitivity in presenting research findings. This is critical in an area like AIDS and religion where a lot of stigma and discrimination has been experienced. Phenomenology of religion therefore appeals to African students and scholars of religion who seek to conduct fieldwork.

Phenomenology of religion is also popular with African scholars because it grants religion a lot of respect. This is a major attraction for African lecturers and students, who are often religious people themselves.³⁴ Most departments of religious studies and theology in African universities recruit students and staff who are active members of Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religions, or other religions. Such students and staff regard social scientific approaches as disrespectful of religion. Like the phenomenologists of religion, they feel that sociological and psychological approaches do not respect the integrity of religion. Phenomenology of religion appeals to them as it regards religion as unique and irreducible, as has been discussed in the foregoing paragraphs.

Phenomenology of religion has also been accepted in Africa because of its resistance to theological reductionism, especially in the study of African Traditional Religions.³⁵ Although phenomenology of religion is supportive of religion in general, it seeks to distance itself from theology. This particular approach to the study of religion seeks to respect every religion in its own right. While some African theologians have approached Christianity as the fulfilment of African Traditional Religions, phenomenology of religion insists that African Traditional Religions are religions worthy of

³⁴James L. Cox, "Religious Studies by the Religious: A Discussion of the Relationship between Theology and the Science of Religion," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 7 (1994): 3-31.

³⁵Ezra Chitando, "Phenomenology of Religion and the Study of African Traditional Religions," 303-304.

human allegiance. This appeals to those African scholars who feel that Christianity and Islam have not been polite guests in Africa. Having been offered accommodation by African Traditional Religions, the host religions, these two missionary religions have then sought to expel African Traditional Religions. Phenomenology of religion gives voice to African Traditional Religions as legitimate religions in their own right.

Phenomenology of Religion in Contemporary Scholarship

As the discussion on the key phenomenological concepts has illustrated, phenomenology of religion has been criticised on many fronts. One of the most devastating criticisms is that phenomenology is an idealistic method that does not have practical applicability. The concepts of *epoche*, empathetic interpolation and eidetic vision have been attacked as lacking practical relevance. Furthermore, critics charge that phenomenology of religion is best understood as an attitude towards religion, rather than as a step-by-step approach to the study of religion. In the following section, this chapter examines some of the emerging discussions concerning the phenomenology of religion.

Feminist Critiques of the Phenomenology of Religion

The phenomenology of religion, like other approaches to the study of religion, has been dominated by male scholars. Since its inception, male scholars have been prescribing its key concepts, as well as trying to apply them to the study of religion. However, there is growing interest in the theme of religion and gender.³⁶ In particular, women scholars of religion have argued that most approaches to the study of religion have concentrated on the religious experiences of men. It is men who have been researching and publishing on religion. Unfortunately, most of their attention has been on the official beliefs and practices. This tends to leave out the views of women who tend to be practitioners of popular religion.

Approaches to the study of religion, including phenomenology of religion, have been criticised for not doing justice to women's religious experiences.³⁷ Feminist critics charge that the principles promoted by the phenomenology of religion operate on masculine assumptions. They give the example of objectivity. It is male scholars who seek to be objective, and who concentrate on the external factors in their analysis of religion. On the other hand, women scholars tend to promote subjectivity, as they seek to connect with the feelings and aspirations of religious women. Consequently, they criticise phenomenology of religion for not being sensitive enough to the sensibilities of religious women.

The feminist critique of the phenomenology of religion is particularly significant for the study of religion in Africa. African societies are highly patriarchal. Men occupy positions of power and authority in African societies. On the other hand, women

³⁶See, for example, Ursula King, ed., *Religion and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

³⁷Arvind Sharma, ed., *Methodology in Religious Studies: The Interface with Women's Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

are expected to respect men and to comply with their demands. African patriarchy has been transferred to Christianity and Islam in Africa. These religions are patriarchal in their own right. Their combination with African patriarchy has pushed women to the periphery of these religions. It is therefore crucial for researchers to appreciate these power dynamics within the different religions found in Africa. Phenomenology of religion tends to be too innocent. It does not have the tools necessary to deconstruct power dynamics in religion.

The feminist critique also applies to the phenomenological dictum, “the believer is always right.” Too often, it has meant upholding the perspective of male believers within the different religions. Since it is men who occupy positions of power and authority, and often serve as the learned interpreters of the traditions, researchers have often reproduced masculine views on religious issues. For example, in the study of African Traditional Religions, the views of chiefs and other male traditional leaders have often been presented as representing indigenous religions. However, interviews with women adherents of African Traditional Religions might offer a totally different picture.

The Scholar of Religion as a Neutral Researcher

Phenomenology of religion seeks to promote scholarly accuracy and neutrality. The scholar of religion is expected to refrain from intervening or taking sides in religious issues. His or her task is to describe religious phenomena, but not to transform them. Since the 1990s, the question as to whether the scholar of religion should remain totally removed from the phenomena of religion has generated debate. Cox writes:

I am calling the third critical debate provoked by the phenomenology of religion the controversy created by the contexts within which the study of religions occurs, which often demand scholars to become involved *as scholars* of religion in the social, political and economic issues that affect directly the religious communities they study.³⁸

This debate is significant in that it has sharply divided scholars of religion. On the one hand are scholars who argue that scholars of religion should never be involved in religious issues while pursuing their scholarly tasks. While they can be actively involved in their private capacities, they should not be engaged in religious issues as scholars. On the other hand there are scholars who argue that the scholar of religion should be a public intellectual. They should be in a position to critique religion and provide useful suggestions on the transformation of religion.

Phenomenology of religion traditionally endorses the position that scholars of religion should not be involved in the social, political and economic issues that affect the religious communities they study. It calls for neutrality regarding such issues. However, it is difficult for scholars of religion, especially those operating in Africa, to avoid such issues. Issues like racism and marginalization affect African scholars of

³⁸ J. L. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion...*, 225.

religion and believers in the same way.³⁹ African scholars of religion might therefore feel inclined to defend African religions. Although phenomenology of religion would encourage African scholars to put their ideological convictions in brackets, African scholars might find it undesirable to do so.

It is difficult for African scholars of religion to uphold the rigid distinction between scholarship and advocacy. Phenomenology of religion seeks to promote “pure” academic research. Although Wiebe is a critic of phenomenology, he shares the basic assumptions of the method over the question of scholarly activism. He writes:

The official policy of departments for the study of religion in the academic setting is that this enterprise, like others in the university, belongs to the cognitive-scientific domain alone and should not serve to further religious, cultural, political, or other ends.⁴⁰

It is debatable whether African scholars can afford to uphold this ideal. Researchers on religion in Africa have often sought to achieve some practical goals, like promoting harmony amongst followers of different religions. In countries where followers of Christianity and Islam have a history of clashes, scholars of religion have sought to remove tensions and cultivate tolerance. Scholars who uphold strict views on the academic study of religion argue that such goals are beyond the mandate of scholars of religion. In other words, while it would be good for followers of different religions to co-exist peacefully, it is not the duty of the scholar of religion to promote cordial relations across religious traditions.

Perhaps one area that clearly brings out the inadequacies of the phenomenology of religion in African contexts is the issue of HIV and AIDS. Phenomenology of religion would recommend carrying out detailed investigations into the role of religion in the epidemic. It would encourage researchers to suspend all their biases, and to ensure that their final product is an accurate representation of their findings. Furthermore, phenomenology of religion would maintain that believers of the different religions should be satisfied with the scholarly publications on religion and HIV and AIDS in Africa. However, scholars do not have the responsibility of transforming beliefs and practices that facilitate the spread of HIV in Africa. If they do this, they are going beyond their mandate as researchers. They would have become activists, instead of remaining within academic boundaries.

Musa W. Dube of Botswana has argued that the era of HIV and AIDS in Africa demands the involvement of people with diverse specialisations. She maintains that lecturers of African Indigenous Religions should become “healer-diviners” who assist their students and communities to offer effective responses to the epidemic. She argues that lecturers of African Indigenous Religions need to engage indigenous healer-diviners and learn from them. Dube writes:

³⁹Afe Adogame and Ezra Chitando, “Moving Among Those Moved by the Spirit: Conducting Fieldwork within the New African Religious Diaspora,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 1(3) (2005): 264.

⁴⁰Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies*..., 121.

An AIR/s (African Indigenous Religion/s) teaching scholar in the HIV & AIDS struggle must be, like a diviner-healer, a highly analytical scholar who understands the wide variety of relationships and how they affect the health of both the individual and the community. Knowledge about HIV & AIDS becomes an addition to one's field of specialty and requires additional research to inform and teach as well as to dialogue with diviner-healers on their understanding of the pandemic. The latter may very well include inviting diviner-healers to the classroom, as well as leading training sessions for them on HIV & AIDS, their causes, impact, and prevention.⁴¹

Scholars who apply the principles of the phenomenology of religion strictly would not endorse Dube's suggestion. They would feel that she is pushing scholars of African Traditional Religions beyond the academic domain into activism. Although the epidemic is a devastating one, phenomenology of religion would argue that scholars of religion should contribute by providing accurate information on the role of religion. However, it is up to religious communities themselves to transform their beliefs and practices that increase vulnerability to HIV and AIDS. Scholars of religion do not have the authority to recommend the transformation of religions in the wake of HIV and AIDS, phenomenology of religion argues.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that phenomenology of religion does not support activism on the part of scholars of religion. However, the reality of HIV and AIDS in Africa raises serious questions regarding this dimension of the method. Can African scholars afford to remain detached when their communities are being devastated by the epidemic? Is academic integrity more important than attempting to save human lives? Should African scholars avoid pressing existential issues like HIV and AIDS in the name of upholding methodological purity? All these questions indicate the need for rethinking phenomenological precepts in the study of religion in Africa.

Conclusion

Phenomenology of religion has emerged as a popular approach in the study of religion in Africa. Although the method has come under attack in Europe and North America, it is rated highly in Africa. However, critics have drawn attention to inherent weaknesses in its key principles, alongside exposing the limitations of its ideals. Despite these weaknesses, it continues to be a viable approach in the academic study of religion. In the particular case of Africa, phenomenology of religion needs to be sensitive to the role of women in religion. As the feminist critique has noted, phenomenology and other approaches have tended to focus on masculine perceptions of religion. Given the importance of women to religion in Africa, phenomenology of religion needs to accord more space to the views of women. Furthermore, the idea of scholarly neutral-

⁴¹Musa W. Dube, "Adinkra! Four Hearts Joined Together: On Becoming Healing-Teachers of African Indigenous Religion/s in HIV & AIDS Prevention," in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, eds. Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 148

ity and distance needs to be reviewed in the African context. African departments of religious studies are often struggling to justify their existence as administrators continue to pursue “cost-cutting” measures. In addition, the African context does not allow the quest for “knowledge for the sake of knowledge”. Consequently, phenomenology of religion in Africa needs to become engaged and socially relevant. By combining its traits of respecting the point of view of the believers, accurate description of religious phenomena and empathy with applied research, phenomenology of religion would enhance its profile in African religious studies.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa: Challenges and Prospects

James N. Amanze

Introduction

The teaching of African Traditional Religion is now firmly established in a number of universities, theological colleges, Secondary Schools and, in some instances, as is the case in Botswana, Primary Schools as well. Let me hasten to say that in this chapter I have chosen to use the term African Traditional Religion (ATR) in the singular as a generic term to mean a diversity of African indigenous religious expressions across Africa. This chapter intends to introduce students to the study of ATR as an academic subject. The chapter will, among other things, attempt a definition of ATR as understood by the author. It will also examine the nature of ATR, its importance among the African people, and sources available for the study of ATR. In addition, this chapter will also discuss some of the major aspects of ATR such as belief in God, the position and role of the ancestors, the role of religious specialists, and some practices and ceremonies that are distinctive features of ATR. Finally, this chapter will examine the challenges and prospects that are faced by ATR in contemporary Africa, mainly with regard to its relationship with Islam and Christianity.

African Traditional Religion: A Definition

It is widely acknowledged today that prior to the coming of Christianity, Islam and other World Religions to Africa, the African people had already developed their own cultures with distinct religions of their own. Religion is very important in practically all human societies. In the context of Africa, African people are quite often described as “incurably religious”, “by nature religious”, “notoriously religious” or “profoundly religious”, epithets that authenticate the religiosity of the African people as described by contemporary African theologians. Though some of these terms may seem derogatory, as some scholars have claimed, they are nevertheless used to emphasise the fact that religion plays a crucial role in the life of African people as they grapple with the ultimate problems of human existence. Every aspect of the life of African people is surrounded by religious beliefs, rituals and ceremonies that accompany the individual from the cradle to the grave. Religion is the hallmark of the social, economic and

political life of the African people. It is a source of social unity, comfort, security and hope, and gives meaning to their life as they struggle against the vicissitudes of life. Standard textbooks on religion normally start by acknowledging the difficulties that arise in defining the word religion. In *African Traditional Religions and Culture in Botswana*,¹ we have discussed this issue at length and so we have no intention of repeating the discussion in full here. However, despite the elusive nature of the meaning of the word “religion”, which has contributed to the failure of scholars to come up with a single definition of the word “religion”, I shall attempt here a definition of African Traditional Religion which appears to me to be consonant with the African way of life. I invite other scholars, who disagree with my definition, to come up with their own. African Traditional Religion can be defined as the *original, indigenous, home-grown, living-faith of the African people. It consists of beliefs, practices, rituals, religious symbols, religious specialists, sacred places, spirituality and ethics which are distinct from those found in other world religions*. There is a need here to unpack some of the terms I have used in this definition. By the word original, I mean that Africa is the cradle or birth place of ATR. By the word “indigenous” I mean that Africa is the natural habitat of ATR and that outside of Africa it becomes a foreign religion. By living-faith, I mean that ATR is still professed and practised by many people across Africa, either openly (as is the case with die-hard traditionalists) or secretly (as is the case with some Christians). The origin of ATR is obscure. What is certain, however, is that it was not introduced in Africa from outside but sprang out of the African soil. It was “founded” by the African people themselves in the context of their cultural, social, political, economic and political milieu. ATR is a way of life. It does not consist of a given set of doctrines to which everyone must subscribe and which determine what is orthodox and unorthodox. The constituents of ATR are not based on a special revelation coded in a Holy Scripture such as the Bible (Christianity), the *Quran* (Islam) or *Bhagavad-gita* (Hinduism) but on the experiences drawn from the “book of nature”, comprising the physical, social and spiritual realms. ATR is not a missionary religion. Unlike Christianity and Islam, which are missionary religions, ATR does not have a specific mission to convert people of other faiths and to bring them into its fold. The membership of ATR is all African. Membership is gained not through conversion but by birth in a given ethnic or social group. It is holistic in the sense that it embraces the totality of the African people’s way of life, socially, economically, politically and spiritually. It defines their personhood in terms of what they were, what they are and what they shall become in the after life.

The Nature of African Traditional Religion

It is important to note that one of the most contested issues in the study of African Traditional Religion is the question as to whether or not ATR can properly be spoken of in the singular. This is because there are a variety of African religious experiences

¹See J. N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religions and Culture in Botswana* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 2006), 1-12.

across the continent. The prevailing view at present is that we cannot really talk about African Traditional Religion per se and that at best we can only talk about African Traditional Religions. There is a general understanding among scholars that there is both unity and diversity in African Traditional Religions. As Edwin Smith once observed, there is, among Africans, considerable diversity in religious belief and practice – diversity associated with differences in physical environment, stages of social and political development, and the degree to which African people have been affected by the influence of other cultures on the African continent.² Having said that, however, it is admitted that despite the various cultural diversities that are prevalent among African peoples in terms of their religious culture, there is an underlying identity in African religions. According to Smith, though we cannot deny or minimise the differences between different African groups, such differences are, quite often, one of emphasis and development and not of essence, to the extent that one is justified in speaking of African Traditional Religion in the singular.³ Shorter has observed that this underlying unity of the traditional religions of the African people is based on the fact that religious concepts and practices have, in the course of African history, been shared over wide areas, and certain beliefs such as belief in ancestors have a near-universal currency.⁴ Dominique Zahan has warned that the religious diversity found across the African continent should not blind us to the point of not seeing their unity. According to Zahan,

The diversity of African ethnic groups should not be an obstacle to such an undertaking since the variation in religion has less to do with the ideas themselves than with their expression by means of dissimilar elements linked to the occupation and the flora and fauna of the area. As anywhere else, here man partially expresses his ideas in terms of the geographical milieu in which he lives. Among each African people man translates in his own way the constant thread of his conception of himself and his relationship to the Invisible. The permanent image of the human spirit is at times clothed in the richest ornaments, at others left in its rough state.⁵

It will be seen from this text that the major differences that exist in the religious phenomena of different African peoples are, largely, a result of one's social location. M. G. Marwick states that the theory of social location of ideas postulates that each of the many categories and groups of people that constitute human society tends to perceive and assess the world through its own set of co-ordinates or grid. In this vein,

²Edwin Smith, *Knowing the African* (London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1946), 99.

³Edwin Smith, *Knowing the African...*, 99.

⁴Aylward Shorter, "African Religions," in *The New Penguin Handbook of Living Religions*, ed. J.R. Hinnels (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 562.

⁵Dominique Zahan, *The religion, spirituality and thought of traditional Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 2.

each sees the world differently in much the same way as the same landscape is seen differently by a farmer, a painter, a geologist, a strategist or a pilot about to make an emergency landing. It follows, therefore, that from this process of differential perception certain ideas become emphasised or even distorted according to the ways in which they serve the interests of different social divisions.⁶ This is the case in Africa, where different people perceive the world differently in accordance with their social, environmental, political, economic, cultural and political setting. It appears to me that on the basis of what we know now, students embarking on the study of ATR should be given a free hand to use either the plural or the singular form of African indigenous religions to mean the same manifestation of religious phenomena.

We shall now move on to examine the exact nature of ATR as compared to other World Religions. One thing that is noticeable almost immediately is its elusive nature. It is difficult to pin down the essence of ATR. John P. Kirby, who undertook some study on the religion of the Anufo people of Ghana, noted that among these people there is no word for religion because religion is not objectified in their thinking but is rather an aspect of all life. He observed that religious belief and practice form an integral part of life and manifest themselves functionally in the modes of action and the apparatus for problem solving.⁷ This is in line with Zahan's contention that the concept of religion in black Africa appears to be among the most difficult to grasp, for when people in the West talk about religion they automatically think of a corpus of doctrines and practices expressing relationship between human beings and the Invisible.⁸ Smith once observed that in Africa there is little external evidence of the existence of African Traditional Religions. It is this fact that made the early missionaries conclude that Africans had no religion whatsoever.⁹ It was only after the missionaries came to know Africans better that they found that religion was everywhere, not as an organized institution separable from the rest of their life, but as part and parcel of it, all-pervasive, motivating, controlling, guiding, and strengthening.¹⁰ Aylward Shorter has observed that the pervasive nature of the African Traditional Religion is seen in the fact that religion permeates every aspect of life in traditional African societies and its history is inseparable from that of their social and political institutions.¹¹ In contrast with other World Religions, ATR is not clearly manifested in the form of sacred buildings, religious specialists such as priests wearing clerical collars or in sacred scripture such as the Bible or the Quran. These things are not immediately evident in Africa unless one makes a thorough research into the belief systems and practices of

⁶M. G. Marwick, "How real is the charmed circle in African and western thought?" in *Africa* 58(1)(1973): 68.

⁷John. P. Kirby, "Cultural change and Religious Conversion in West Africa," in *Religion in Africa*, eds. Thomas D. Blakely and others (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994), 62.

⁸D. Zahan, *The religion, spirituality and thought...*, 1.

⁹E. Smith, *Knowing the African...*, 101.

¹⁰E. Smith, *Knowing the African...*, 101.

¹¹A. Shorter, "African Religions"..., 563.

the African people with a sympathetic but objective approach. One of the factors that make ATR unidentifiable in Africa is that it does not stand out on its own as a separate institution. It exists in a diffused form with its beliefs, rituals, theology and organisation intimately merged with secular institutions. Since ATR permeates every aspect of the life of the individual and the community, it follows that no distinction is made between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the material. The whole of life is sacred in that it is saturated with the divine. Booth has observed that since African Religion exists in a diffused form, daily activities—economic, social and political—are, to a certain extent, manifestations of the religion of the African people. In this context the sacred and the profane are two sides of the same coin.¹²

The Antiquity of African Traditional Religion

It has been noted above that African Traditional Religion is the original religion of the African people. It is the oldest expression of religious life on the African continent. This view is supported by archaeological and other pre-historic evidence. Pierre de Matre, in his paper entitled “Archaeological and other Prehistoric Evidence of Traditional African Religious Expression,” has identified five elements that attest to the ancient nature of ATR, namely, rock art, sculptures, burial practices, monuments and language.

In the first instance, de Matre has noted that rock art is one of the areas where some manifestations of ATR have been found. Some such paintings are associated with ritual events, others have been associated with myths and religious ritual practices. De Matre has observed that the most exciting evidence of a connection between rock painting and rituals has come from Southern Africa. The oldest dated evidence of naturalistic animal painting which appears to have some religious meaning has been found in Southern Namibia in the Apollo XI cave. Three detached slabs bearing the painting of a human figure and the outline of a rhinoceros occur in levels dated some 28,000 years ago. Archaeologists have established a connection between San rock painting and shamanism, especially in the trace dance.¹³

Apart from rock art paintings, the expression of African Traditional Religion has been found in African sculptures in one form or another which pre-date the arrival of other religions in Africa. Some sculptures by Early Iron Age farmers (circa A.D 500), associated with ritual occasions such as initiation schools, were discovered near Lydenburg in Eastern Transvaal, South Africa. Other such findings include heads of the Aowin style in South West Ghana, sculpture heads in the South of Lake Chad (10th century), Nok sculptures from Central Nigeria and the Djenne Djeno sculptures from the inner delta of the Niger (12th century A.D).¹⁴

¹²A. Shorter, “African Religions”..., 1-2.

¹³Pierre de Matre, “Archaeological and other Prehistoric Evidence of Traditional African Religious Expression,” in *Religion in Africa*, eds. Thomas D. Blakely and others (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994), 186.

¹⁴P. de Matre, “Archaeological and other Prehistoric Evidence...,” 188.

Besides sculptures, it has also been observed that African burial practices affirm the great antiquity of African Traditional Religion. According to de Matre, there is ample evidence that in most African societies the dead were buried with some of their material possessions, to be used in the after life. These included pottery, basketry, axes, anvil, and hoes. Some of such tools, which date back to AD 845, were found in graves at Kamilamba, Eastern Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo).¹⁵

In addition to burial sites, it has been noted that there are certain monuments in Africa which indicate the ancient nature of African Traditional Religion. One of these is the famous ruins of Great Zimbabwe. It has been noted, for instance, that the Shona word Zimbabwe means “venerated house, the dwelling of a chief,” in which case Great Zimbabwe is interpreted as the residence of a sacred chief with some spaces and structures designed for ceremonies. It has further been observed that Great Zimbabwe became the central settlement of an oligarchy that had grown out of the present stock around the thirteenth century.¹⁶ Peter Garlake, cited by de Matre, has postulated that though at present archaeology does not allow precise interpretation of religion in Great Zimbabwe, there is no doubt that the turrets, towers, monoliths, altars, and a series of soapstone sculptures of birds that were set both on walls and altars must have had a supernatural significance.¹⁷ Great Zimbabwe is taken as a good example of the way in which political and religious powers were intimately linked in the rituals of many sacred kingships.¹⁸

Other examples in Africa which testify to the ancient nature of African Traditional Religion consist of megalithic structures dated around 500 BC, found near Bouar in Central African Republic. In Senegal, some megalithic monuments, generally tombs, go back to the sixth and ninth centuries.¹⁹ Finally, there is also evidence that from a linguistic perspective there are certain words in many African languages that testify to the ancient nature of African Traditional Religion. In many African societies the word for God pre-dates the arrival of other World Religions.²⁰

The Resilience of African Traditional Religion

One of the most interesting aspects of African Traditional Religion is its resilience. John P. Kirby, in his paper entitled “Cultural change and religious conversion in West Africa,” has pointed out that in 1910 at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, it was predicted that the people of Africa would have lost their ancient faiths within a generation and that they would accept the religious culture of the first people who came to evangelise among them. In the same vein, Professor Roland Oliver, using geometrical conversion progressions of Africa South of the Sahara, predicted that by

¹⁵P. de Matre, “Archaeological and other Prehistoric Evidence...,” 188.

¹⁶P. de Matre, “Archaeological and other Prehistoric Evidence...,” 192.

¹⁷See P. de Matre, “Archaeological and other Prehistoric Evidence...,” 192.

¹⁸P. de Matre, “Archaeological and other Prehistoric Evidence...,” 192.

¹⁹P. de Matre, “Archaeological and other Prehistoric Evidence...,” 192.

²⁰P. de Matre, “Archaeological and other Prehistoric Evidence...,” 192.

1992 there would be no “*pagans*” left at all (my emphasis). It is true that millions and millions of Africans have embraced Christianity and millions others have embraced Islam and yet, despite tremendous successes of missionary work in Africa, neither of the above predictions has materialised.²¹

Christian missionaries and, to some extent, Muslim clerics have exerted tremendous pressure on the African people to bury the African past and yet ATR has refused to die and to be buried. As a matter of fact, ATR is still in existence and there are strong indications that it is here to stay. Kirby has observed that the resilience of ATR should be attributed largely to the need of the African people to assert their cultural identity and authenticity.²² He has further noted that, as is the case among the Anufo of northern Ghana, ATR offers psychological reassurance, behavioural confirmation, social integration, explanation of the unknown, explanation of origins and, above all, a practical way of solving problems. ATR is viewed as a tool for keeping a harmonious balance by using sacred space such as shrines to manipulate relations between persons, spirits and things.²³

Why Study African Traditional Religion as an Academic Subject?

During the colonial period, historical mission churches universally condemned African Traditional Religion as a personification of evil and demanded that it should be eradicated. This view persists even today in certain quarters. Die-hard Christian fundamentalists preach sermons and organize evangelistic campaigns which vilify belief in ancestral spirits, traditional healers, diviners, and other ritual practices associated with ATR. Many Christians have been made to believe that all that is African, especially matters to do with indigenous religious experience, is evil by nature. Surprisingly, as a result of brainwashing strategies, even some “educated” Africans have accepted this as gospel truth and shy away from their own cultural heritage as embarrassing. We may therefore ask “What then is the use of studying such a religion, which is branded as antiquated, devilish, antichristian and out of touch with modernity and post-modernity in contemporary Africa?” My answer to this question is that the study of ATR in Africa today is very important in many ways. It is not only profoundly interesting but it is academically rewarding in that through the study of ATR students acquire special knowledge concerning the cultures and identity of the African people. A survey of World Religions in Africa shows that there is a considerable number of people who still profess the original, indigenous religions of Africa. This phenomenon is worth investigating. We need to know why this is the case. The fact that some African countries still have a high percentage of people professing ATR such as Benin (54.8%), Botswana (37%), Burkina Faso (33%), Togo (36%), Cote D’Ivoire (30%), Liberia (49.4%), Guinea Bissau (48%), Sierra Leone (48%), Zambia ((23%), Zimbabwe (32.6%) and Mozambique (40%) is an indication that African

²¹J. P. Kirby, “Cultural Change...”, 57.

²²J. P. Kirby, “Cultural Change...”, 57.

²³J. P. Kirby, “Cultural Change...”, 62.

Traditional Religion is still a religious power to reckon with. On average, nearly 20% of the African population still adheres to ATR. Though in some African countries the percentage of the adherents of ATR fluctuates between 10% and 5%,²⁴ the indication is that ATR still constitutes a vital force in those countries. What is more intriguing is the fact that even in countries where the percentage of ATR adherents is very low, in many cases both Christians and Muslims continue to hold African religious beliefs and values and continue to participate in indigenous religious practices such as initiation ceremonies for boys and girls, use protective and fortifying medicines, fear witchcraft, consult traditional healers and diviners and the like. This phenomenon by itself warrants a serious study of ATR.

It should be noted that the study of ATR deepens our understanding of the African people as a distinctive species of the human race. The argument that ATR is a product of the African culture and therefore must be studied earnestly is true of all the religions of the world which are part of the school curriculum today. They are all products of human culture or, at least, they have emerged within a given culture of a specific group of people. This is true of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other World Religions. Since religion is a product of culture, the study of African Traditional Religion can help students to understand the African way of life better than ever before. ATR is one of the indices of being authentically African. Culture is the heart-beat of any people in the world. In the context of Africa, ATR links the African people with the past, the present and the future. To the African people, ATR is an emblem that distinguishes them from other people in the universe. I concur with Sir Seretse Kgama who once said, "a nation without a past is a lost nation and a people without a past is a people without a soul."²⁵

Another reason that necessitates the study of ATR is that, since the days of colonial rule up to the present, the African people have undergone intense and extensive cultural change. It has been observed that much of Africa's cultural heritage has either disappeared or is undergoing radical social transformation as a result of cultural integration and assimilation. Sooner or later much of Africa's cultural heritage is likely to disappear completely and African people will, one day, be a people without a past. Since much of the cultural heritage of the African people has been lost or is in the process of being lost, there is an urgent need for deliberate steps to be taken to preserve what still remains of the African culture for future generations. This is in line with the late Sir Seretse Kgama's vision and aspirations when he said that there is a need "to try and retrieve what we can of our past. We should write our history books, to prove that we did have a past; and that it was a past that was just as worth writing and learning about as any other."²⁶

²⁴See J. Hildebrandt, *History of the Church in Africa* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1996), 247-281.

²⁵*Botswana Daily News*, May 1970, 3.

²⁶*Botswana Daily News*, May 1970, 3.

Apart from the need to retrieve ancient cultural values of the African past and to preserve what is still remaining of the African culture today, there are other valid reasons which make the study of ATR imperative. These can be grouped into five categories, namely, psychological, political, philosophical, economic and sociological. First, from a psychological point of view, it is a well-known fact that religion plays a very important role in the development of human personality. Psychological studies have shown that religion plays a very important role in the process of becoming. Religion has a powerful influence in determining what we become as a person. The concept of becoming is crucial because it provides an adequate explanation of the question of how human beings develop their individuality and growth. Religion is one of the factors that shape people's attitudes, feelings, motives, maturity, values, habits, faculties, dispositions and emotions. It is also a significant factor in the ongoing process by which personality thrives.²⁷ As a general rule, religion contributes significantly to the processes of developing the five "big" personality traits of extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and intellect/openness to experience.²⁸

It has been argued in certain quarters that, to some degree, every person is religious, for each human being has faith, however dimly felt and inarticulate, that life as a whole has a meaning. The study of ATR reveals to us the nature of the African personhood. Personhood has been defined as "the stable, yet fluid complex product of biological endowment, cultural shaping, cognitive style and spiritual groping."²⁹ But apart from enhancing our understanding of the African personality, the study of ATR can also help the student to understand African behaviour. By most accounts, religions play a fundamental role in shaping the behaviour of people in society on matters relating to crime, human sexuality, charity, altruism, prejudice, and spirituality in general.

Secondly, the study of ATR enables us to understand the role that ATR has played and still plays in the political history of the African people. The concept of the priest-king has, throughout the centuries, been the legitimating power of traditional rulers in Africa. The idea that kings, chiefs and other traditional rulers are divine agents legitimates their authority and enhances their power to enforce peace, order and stability in traditional African societies. Besides, a number of indigenous religious institutions have, in the past, played a crucial role in the preservation, maintenance and survival of a number of African communities. Some such institutions were sources of political resistance during the pre-colonial and colonial period. Here are a few examples to substantiate this point: in the first instance, the Mau Mau nationalistic movement, that originated in the 1950s among the Kikuyu people of Kenya, was based on the belief

²⁷Robert W. Crapps, *An Introduction to Psychology of Religion* (Macon: Mercer University Press), 150-159.

²⁸Richard Ross, *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behaviour* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), 619.

²⁹R. W. Crapps, *An Introduction to Psychology of Religion...*, 152.

that Ngai, their God, gave the land to Gikuyu and Mumbi, their progenitors, and that any other form of land appropriation by the white settlers was illegal. The Mau Mau advocated violent resistance to British domination in Kenya. The movement was especially associated with the ritual oaths employed by leaders of the Kikuyu Central Association to promote unity in the independence movement. The oaths were based on the religious values of initiation ceremonies of boys, which formed into age sets and led to the formation of “clubs” with permanent membership. Despite government actions to nip the movement in the bud, the Kikuyu movement, fuelled by the indigenous religious values centred on land, spearheaded the Kenya independence movement, and Jomo Kenyatta, who had been jailed as a Mau Mau leader in 1953, became prime minister of an independent Kenya in 1961.³⁰

Another good example is that of the Maji Maji mass movement, which was waged by Africans against German colonial rule in what was then German East Africa. It lasted from July 1905 to August 1907 and covered over 100,000 square miles of the southern third of what is now mainland Tanzania. It involved over twenty different ethnic groups. Maji Maji was a protest movement against German oppression. It was in a real sense a war for independence. The movement was inspired and driven by a religious ideology based on indigenous religious beliefs, the essence of which was that all Africans were one and that they were free human beings. It was also held that those who partook of the Maji war medicine would be immune from European bullets. The dead ancestors would assist them in the war, which had been commanded by God. Ethnicity and individualism were rejected and communal and universal values were emphasised as a means of crushing German colonial rule. Although this mass action failed in the face of a more powerful enemy, the Maji religious ideology became the basis of a revolutionary movement against colonial oppression and exploitation.³¹

Another good example is how the Mwari cult enabled the Shona to resist complete Nguni colonial rule. N. H. Bhebe in his paper entitled “The Ndebele and Mwari before 1893: A Religious Conquest of the Conquerors by the Vanquished,” has argued that one of the factors that led the victorious Ndebele in Zimbabwe to adopt in their religious system the Mwari cult prevalent among the Shona, whom they had conquered militarily, was their inability to realize their religious goals. Being away from Zululand, the Zulu were cut off from their sacred places and their prayers for rain, conducted in the absence of royal graves, lost some of their significance and effectiveness. He further argued that, since rain-calling among the people of South Africa depended on the study of the clouds and other forecasts of the weather to account for

³⁰Roger D. Hughes, *Emergency in Kenya: Kikuyu and the Mau Mau Insurrection* (Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1984), 7-22. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1984/HRD.htm> (July 23, 2008)

³¹G. C. K. Gwassa, “Kinjikitile and the Ideology of Maji Maji,” in *The Historical Study of African Religion*, eds. T. O. Ranger and Isaria Kimambo (London: Heinemann, 1972), 202-204.

its success, the Ndebele lost their centuries-long experience when they moved into the Shona territory, which was drought-prone. The Shona, as owners of the land, are said to have had not only the advantage of being profoundly conversant with the natural environmental problems and possibilities of Matabeleland, but they also had a far better-developed concept of the supernatural than the Ndebele. The cult that grew around Mwari was well-organized and related to the people by means of a system of priests.³² Terence Ranger has observed that the Ndebele, anxious to be on good terms with the God of the land, sent regular tributes to the Mwari shrine, though Mzilikazi and Lobengula were careful to restrict the influence of the cult as much as they could. In this context, the relationship between the Ndebele and the Mwari cult, which is predominantly Shona in origin, is characterized by what Bhebe has termed “the conquest of the conquerors by the vanquished”.³³

The same can be said of the First *Chimurenga Resistance* in Zimbabwe, which was colonized in the early 1980s by the British South African Company. It is held that the Company used a combination of deceit and violence to gain control of Zimbabwe and to take away the best land from the Shona and Ndebele people. As a result, the Ndebele and the Shona staged an armed uprising (*chimurenga*) against the European colonizers, which lasted from 1896 to 1897. What is important to note is that traditional religious leaders played a significant role in leading these uprisings. According to Lovemore Togarasei, the uprisings were led by two spirit mediums, namely, Kaguvi (male) and Nehanda (female) among the Shona people in Mashonaland. Their grievances were fuelled by rinderpest and drought, which were attributed to the presence of the whites. The two religious leaders were arrested and sentenced to death. Before Nehanda died, however, she uttered an oracle that her bones would rise and fight again for the liberation of the Zimbabwean people and the eventual recovery of the land. This religious force, it is argued, was behind the *Second Chimurenga*, also known as the Liberation Struggle or the Rhodesian Bush War. This was a guerrilla war, spear-headed by Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, which lasted from 1964 to 1979 and led to universal suffrage, the end of white-rule in Zimbabwe and the creation of the Republic of Zimbabwe. The spirit of Nehanda is believed to have directed the war by guiding the freedom fighters. During the war, spirit mediums advised the freedom fighters on how to evade the enemy, and the spirit of Nehanda is believed to have guided Mugabe to escape into Mozambique. All in all, this religious force, whose presence was manifested in different ways, is believed to have propelled the freedom fighters to victory and the eventual liberation of Zimbabwe.³⁴

³²N. H. Bhebe, “The Ndebele and the Mwari before 1893: A Religious Conquest of the Conquerors by the Vanquished,” in *Guardians of the Land*, ed. Matthew Schoffeleers (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1979), 287ff.

³³Terence O. Ranger, “The Nineteenth Century in Southern Rhodesia,” in *Aspects of Central African History*, ed. Terence O. Ranger (London: Heinemann, 1968), 121.

³⁴Interview with Lovemore Togarasei, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Botswana, Gaborone (December 12, 2007).

The final example can be drawn from Southern Malawi where the Chewa people developed a rain cult commonly known as the Bimbi cult. When the Yao people from northern Mozambique conquered the Chewa territory, they had to come to terms with a new religious force – the Bimbi. The Yaos' climatic experiences in Mozambique in the study of clouds and other forecasts of the weather were limited because of their emphasis on hunting and war activities as a means of securing food, and they were even more limited when they moved into the Malawi littoral. Consequently, they appear to have had no choice but to give in to the skills and abilities displayed by the Bimbis and their cult officials, which could, at least, be displayed once every year. In this context, it seems plausible to assert that, although the Chewa lost much of their political power to the Yao, they actually conquered the Yao through their religion. This gave rise to politics of compromise in which the Yao chiefs ruled as political heads, and the Chewa reigned as a ritual class with the Bimbis as their spiritual heads.³⁵ Third, from a sociological point of view, ATR plays a vital role in the life of the African people. Its impact is evident everywhere. The emphasis on the community rather than on the individual is based on the understanding that a human being is a "community animal" and not an island. Hence the saying, "I am because we are". ATR provides the meaning of life to the African people and helps them to cope as a community with the ultimate problems of human existence such as pain, suffering, sickness and death. Socially, religion is a source of social unity and social cohesion. The totemic system, as found among Batswana in Botswana, furnishes us with a good example of how religion cements the social ties of a group of people. The totem is an emblem and a flag that enhances the social unity of many ethnic groups in Botswana. Many are known by the name of their totem and many Batswana feel a sense of pride when they are addressed by their totemic symbols such as *kwena* (crocodile) among the Bakwena of Molepolole, *phuti* (duiker) among the Bangwato of Serowe, *phofu* (eland) among the Bahurutshe of Tonota, *thakadu* (ant bear) among the Batlokwa of Tlokeng, *tshipi* (iron) among the Barolong in the Barolong farms, *kgabo* (monkey) among the Bakgatla of Mochudi, to name but a few. The totems act as the cement of society in every respect and contribute towards peace, harmony, tranquillity, social order, unity, social solidarity and social cohesion.³⁶

Fourth, from a philosophical perspective, World Religions embody within their religious tradition a philosophy of life, which influences the behaviour or ethical conduct or morality of its adherents. This is particularly true of ATR. One of the basic philosophical views of ATR has to do with what it means to be a human being. This philosophical concept, variously known as *umunthu*, *ubuthu*, or *botho*, sums up the essence of humanity in Africa. In Botswana, a country where I have carried out exten-

³⁵See James N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religion in Malawi: The Case of the Bimbi Cult* (Blantyre: CLAIM, 2002), 172.

³⁶See James N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religions and Culture in Botswana* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 2002), 359-376, where the totemic system among Batswana has been discussed in detail.

sive and intensive research, the philosophical concept of *botho* has an all-embracing meaning of what it means to be a human being created in the image and likeness of God. It denotes a person with a rounded character, a person of great integrity, honesty, respectful, hardworking, obedient, caring, loving, with high self-esteem, exemplary in every way, not selfish, mindful of the needs of others, and well behaved in every way possible. In many African societies, there are proverbs which teach people moral values as to how to live a good life. Among Batswana there are proverbs which teach people how to behave in society. Here is one: “*motho ke motho ke batho*,” which means “a person is a person because of the people”.³⁷ In Ghana there is a proverb which says “The ruins of a nation begin in the homes of its people,” (*Oman bebo a efiri fie*) indicating that if a nation is to survive in time and space it requires households that are strong and united. In the same vein, in Ethiopia there is a proverb which says, “when spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion” which, again, emphasizes the need for family or national unity. Another Ethiopian proverb says, “He who conceals his disease, cannot be expected to be cured,” something that encourages people, especially in the era of HIV and AIDS, to know and declare their status so that they may be assisted by those who have the means to do so. Similarly, there is a Guinean proverb which says, “He who does not cultivate his field will die of hunger”. This proverb teaches people the virtues of hard work in order to be self-sufficient.³⁸

Finally, ATR is worthy of careful study because of its influence and impact on the traditional economy of the African people. Many African economies are based on subsistence agriculture, which depends primarily on the availability of rain and the fertility of the land. Because of the capricious nature of the weather in Africa, which does not offer a guarantee of a timely and adequate supply of rain, many African communities revert to traditional rainmaking ceremonies. This is done with the assistance of rainmakers, who advise people to make libations to God through the ancestors.³⁹ Sometimes such prayers take Christian or Islamic forms. Be that as it may, the crux of the matter is that whatever form they take, they show the crucial role that religion plays in ensuring the availability of the basic necessities of life, such as water and food, in traditional societies. In the context of Africa, there are a number of rain cults and cult leaders whose function is to intercede for rain on behalf of the people. Good examples of these are the Mwari Cult among the Shona of Zimbabwe, the Kalanga in northern Botswana and the Mbona and Bimbi cults among the Chewa of Southern Malawi.

³⁷During my research in Botswana I collected a number of proverbs which are full of moral teaching some of which appear in my book titled *African Traditional Religions and Culture in Botswana*. Space does not allow us to include many of such proverbs here.

³⁸I saw a number of these proverbs carefully inscribed in the RAIN office in Charlotte, North Carolina, USA, when I visited the office on 22 January 2008. The proverbs were used to teach people about the wisdom of the African people in the era of HIV and AIDS.

³⁹See James N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religions and culture in Botswana...*, 320-334 and James N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religion in Malawi...*, 97-123, where rain making rituals in Botswana and Malawi are discussed in detail.

Sources for the Study of African Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion, unlike other World Religions such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism which have sacred scriptures on which students base their study of such religions, ATR has no sacred scripture at all. Christianity and Islam are considered revealed religions because, it is held, God made his will known to his people Israel and the Arabs through the Bible and the Quran respectively. They also have specific founders, who left behind a set of teaching for their followers. In the case of African Traditional Religion, we do not have such founders and so there is nothing in a written form to which scholars can refer as the orthodox teaching of ATR. The teaching and learning of ATR is based on oral traditions, which are passed on from one generation to another by word of mouth. This makes the study of ATR rather difficult, but not impossible. There are a number of sources that we can use in the study of ATR.

In the first instance, there are, at present, a number of books that have been written on indigenous religions of the African people, books such as W. C. Willoughby, *The Soul of the Bantu* (1928), T.C. Young, *African ways and wisdom* (1937), Placide Tempel, *Bantu Philosophy* (1959), E. W. Smith, *African ideas of God* (1961), E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (1962), John Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (1963), John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (1969), *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970) and *Introduction to African Religion* (1975), Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A definition* (1973), N. Booth (ed.), *African Religions: A symposium* (1977), Benjamin Ray, *African Religions* (1976), Charles Nyamiti, *African tradition and the Christian God* (1977), to name but a few. These provide a good starting point before going into books that have been specifically written for a particular country or group of African people. There are also journals which carry articles on African indigenous religion, which are worthwhile reading.

Apart from consulting books in the libraries, which have been written by experts in the field, students of ATR should also consult archival material, which is stored in the archives of many African countries. Such archives have proved to be a source of much information about the religious beliefs, practices, rituals and other cultural aspects of the African people. In many such archives there are missionary records, anthropological accounts of ethnic groups, colonial records of religious uprisings, cultural practices, customs, religious movements, institutions and the like. In consulting such archives one should leave no stone unturned and investigate every lead that can inform us of the religious systems of the indigenous people on the African continent.

In addition to this, students of African Traditional Religion can source information by means of interviews in the field, which can then be carefully recorded. Chiefs, village elders, ordinary men and women, diviners, traditional healers, rainmakers and prophets, in any given African society, are reservoirs of information regarding the constituents of African Traditional Religion. One must ask them relevant questions in order to extract from them the desired information. Historical accounts of chiefs, migration stories, conquest of one ethnic group by another and trading activities must be carefully recorded and analysed. Besides descent systems especially of chiefs,

headmen and religious specialists, marriage systems, initiation ceremonies, agricultural rituals and ceremonies, birth and death rituals and rules of inheritance must also be studied carefully and critically. Students must collect myths, folklore, totems and proverbs and study them carefully. Apart from fieldwork interviews by means of questionnaires, one can also gather information through participant observation. By being a participant observer, students of ATR can collect a great deal of information concerning the nature and meaning of rituals, religious practices, festivals, ways of worship, the role and function of religious specialists as well as symbolic actions and words. Since African Traditional Religion permeates every aspect of the African life one must examine carefully the customs, traditions, artefacts, social, political, economic and religious activities of the people. In other words, the entire African ethos must be subject to careful and critical scrutiny in order to isolate the religious aspects of people's lives. Furthermore, sacred places such as mountains, ancient ruins, burial places especially of chiefs and headmen, caves, rivers, forests, hills, pools, certain lakes, certain trees, animals, celestial bodies such as the moon and the sun, certain rocks, and shrines contain much that is religious.

Major Elements of African Indigenous Religious Thought

It has been indicated above that African religious expressions have a lot in common, to the extent that we are justified in talking about African Traditional Religion in the singular. In this section we shall examine some of the major elements of ATR which are common to most African people. In the first instance, it appears that most African indigenous expressions have a well-established concept of the High God. Although this is a hotly contested area, it is now generally agreed that the concept of the High God is widely known in tropical Africa and that it existed long before the coming of Christianity and Islam. In most African societies the High God is conceived as One, Creator, Almighty, Provider, Supreme, Eternal and Comforter. One of the most fundamental characteristics of the High God in Africa is that God is Spirit, therefore he cannot be represented by graven images for that would constitute a form of idolatry. Research findings in the second half of the 20th century by high-powered African scholars have established conclusively that within the many diverse ethnic groups in Africa there are no known instances of a physical representation of the High God. It is also well established that within the cosmological schema of the African people, God is conceived as having a spirit world where the living-dead go to live forever and can continue to interact actively, as ancestors, with members of their families in this world. Though there are no special days set aside for the worship of God, such as Fridays, Saturdays or Sundays as is the case in other World Religions such as Islam, Judaism and Christianity respectively, this does not imply that God is not worshipped or approached by means of prayer. As a matter of fact, every single moment in the life of the African people is dedicated to the Master Creator. But, apart from celebrating God, African Traditional Religion also celebrates humanity. It is believed that human beings have within their power the means of a happy and significant life. In this regard, human relationships are central to the African way of life. They are characterised

not by individualism but by communal humanism. Therefore, in African societies the interests of the individual are subordinated to that of the community.⁴⁰

Coupled with this, many African societies share a belief in the existence of spiritual beings. It is perceived that these spirits can be either good or bad, personal or impersonal, human or non-human. It is believed that they are all presided over by a personal Creator God, who alone is regarded as having derived his being from himself. One of the most common beliefs is in the existence of the ancestral spirits. Africans have a strong sense of continuity, which unites the past, the present and the future. It is generally agreed that the present is the centre of time, but it is only meaningful insofar as it extends in either direction, that is, into the distant past to link it with the ancestors, and into the future to link it with the unborn generations. African societies, therefore, are made up of a three-tier system consisting of the living, the living-dead and those yet to be born. The living-dead, the living and the not-yet-born play a very important role in the survival of the corporate group. Ancestral spirits reveal that the dead, as active members of society, have special needs that must be fully met by the society before they can be expected to play their role in the life of the individual and the community. In their role as mediators they provide a link with the past, the present and the future. They also provide channels of communication between the all-transcendent God and the people in their social setting. It is widely believed that one of the roles played by the ancestors is to act as guardians of public morality, something they do zealously, leading to punishment of offenders if they break societal taboos, and to the reward of those who uphold community moral values graciously.⁴¹

In addition to this, African Traditional Religion tends to view human beings as *homo religiosus*. Existing literature seems to indicate that one of the most common features of African Traditional Religion is the principal idea that human beings are by nature religious. The cosmology of the African people embraces the physical and the metaphysical, the visible and the invisible, matter and spirit, sacred and profane. As has already been indicated above, no clear distinction is made between the sacred and the profane. In order to maintain a perpetual balance between the sacred and the profane the two worlds are supposed to be in perfect union with one another, but with the sacred dictating the course of human affairs. In this context, the profane is supposed to participate fully in the sacred and the sacred in the profane. The two worlds, namely, the physical and the metaphysical, are interdependent and it is this interdependence that provides meaning to life as a whole.⁴²

⁴⁰Almost all general books that have been written on African Traditional Religion discuss the concept of God in Africa. The most informative of these is John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1970).

⁴¹General books on African Traditional Religion also devote a great deal of space to the ancestral spirits. See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 83-91.

⁴²The idea that Africans are by nature religious is attested to in many textbooks on this subject.

Alongside this, African Traditional Religion acknowledges the imperfect nature of humankind. Benjamin Ray, in his article "African Religions," has pointed out that the notion of the imperfect nature of the human condition is common to most African religions. This is shown by the fact that almost all African societies have creation stories or myths, which give an account of the origins of life and death. Such myths normally assert that the first human beings were created immortal. They were not supposed to suffer or to die. This situation, however, came to an end either as a result of disobedience or accident. Consequently, human beings began to suffer all kind of afflictions such as sickness, natural disasters and death. Eventually, suffering and death have become fundamental characteristics of human existence. According to Ray, the function of myths is to explain this state of human existence. Ray has pointed out that the belief that human societies are not perfect institutions, and that religion provides the ways and means of correcting the moral wrongs committed in the community, is also common to all African Traditional Religions. There is a general understanding that moral and social values that are jealously guarded by the ancestors provide guidelines for the attainment of the good life. These moral injunctions are emphasised during religious ceremonies whose objective is to enable people to renew their commitment to them.⁴³

Moreover, African religious thought tends to emphasise the present reality. Ray has observed that the indigenous religions of Africa explain and control immediate experiences of human existence here and now. By and large, they do not promise personal salvation in the afterlife and they do not advocate the end of the world at some distant future. Rather, they are concerned with the life of the individual and the communities in the present plane of human life in which case punishment and salvation are considered as present realities. To this end, there are a number of rituals and ceremonies that are carried out in most African societies whose objective is to effect salvation to those who are afflicted by sickness, natural disasters and other dangers that may threaten their lives. Ray has noted that there is a general belief among Africans that they are the architects of their own misfortunes. It is believed, for example, that blame for suffering should be placed squarely on people's misdeeds or sins, which offend the lesser gods and the ancestors, who, eventually, punish the offenders. It is also believed that social tensions and conflicts can cause illness and other misfortunes. There is also a commonly held belief that there are rituals which can offer solutions to human problems and thus provide them with some form of salvation from personal and communal ills, including death.⁴⁴

It should be added here that African religious ideologies lack specific founders such as those of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism and the like. However, some aspects of traditional religions in Africa have cult heroes, who are associated with the origin and development of a number of territorial cults across the continent. For in-

⁴³Benjamin Ray, "African Religions," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* Vol.1, ed. M. Eliade (London: Macmillan, 1987), 62.

⁴⁴B. Ray, "African Religions...", 63.

stance, it is held that among the Nyakusa people in Tanzania there was a cult commonly known as the Mbasi cult in which, it is believed, an oracular unseen voice spoke as the voice of divinity. It is believed that people used this cult in their fight against witchcraft, rinderpest and smallpox.⁴⁵ Again, Lamin Sanneh has reported that in Sierra Leone there were a number of well-organized local traditional religions. One aspect of these was the belief in Egun, an invisible religious personage who was believed to inhabit an invisible world of spirits. It was believed that Egun used to return to earth at periodic intervals to punish or reward people according to their deeds and seems to have protected them when they behaved according to his moral demands.⁴⁶ Modern scholarship has also established that the Lozi people in Zambia had a religious cult that was centred around the tomb belonging to a certain Moana Mbinyi, an ancient king of the Lozi. Tombs of this nature occupied an important position in the religious schema of the Lozi whose Supreme Being is *Nyambe* or *Mulimu*. *Nyambe* could be addressed directly in prayer by the Lozi but below him were *balimu* consisting of the spirits of the ancestors.⁴⁷ In Malawi, research findings of the late J. H. Rangeley, Matthew Schoffeleers and the present author have brought to light the existence of three territorial cults, namely, Chisumphu, Mbona and Bimbi. These cults are associated with three cult heroes, namely, Makewana (the mother of all people), Mbona (seer) and Bimbi (rainmaker) respectively. These cults flourished among the Chewa people in Central and Southern Malawi in the pre-colonial period. Their influence, however, continues to be felt in present-day Malawi. Mention should also be made here of the Mwari cult that has flourished among the Shona and Bakalanga people in Zimbabwe and North-east Botswana.⁴⁸ The existence of similar cults and cult figures has been recorded in Nigeria, Ghana, and other places in Africa.

Another major element of ATR found in most African societies is rites of passage or initiation ceremonies. Initiation schools for boys and girls ensure a stable transitional process of individuals from one state of life to another, from inferior status to superior status, from childhood to adulthood. It is commonly believed in African circles that a person's life goes through certain specific stages. Ray has observed that in African societies African Traditional Religion plays the role of enabling people to move successfully through the major stages of life, namely, birth, puberty, marriage, elderhood, death and ancestorhood. Each of these phases has its own responsibilities and privileges, which ensure the stability of the society as a whole and a smooth

⁴⁵W. B. Anderson, *The Church in East Africa 1840-1974* (Dodoma: Central Tanganyika Press, 1977), 57.

⁴⁶Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1983), 86.

⁴⁷J. Weller & J. Linden, *Mainstream Christianity to 1980 in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 29.

⁴⁸See J. N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religion in Malawi* (2002), *African Traditional Religion In Botswana* (2006), and also M. Schoffeleers, ed., *Guardians of the Land*, where this topic has been discussed in detail.

transition from the present state of life to the afterlife. Other institutions such as kingship, chieftaincy and traditional priesthood are also legitimised by rites of passage.⁴⁹

Another major feature of African Traditional Religion is the prominence given to atonement, which is secured by means of sacrifices, offerings and festivals. It is generally held that the religiosity of the African people is characterised by an intense feeling of wanting to be at one with one another, with the ancestors and ultimately with God. It is commonly believed that human beings cannot live in harmony with God, the ancestors and themselves unless this relationship is renewed continually. Ritual observances in Africa are not an end in themselves but a means to an end. Thus, it is important to note that prayers, offerings and sacrifices are found practically everywhere in African Traditional Religion. African people have a considerable sense of shame when wrongdoing is committed and strive to make amends through prayer, offerings and sacrifices to God through the ancestors. In addition to this, there are certain occasions in many African societies that may require purification ceremonies of different kinds in order to remove individual and communal impurities in the social fabric. Offerings and sacrifices form an integral part of the worship of the Supreme Being. It is also important to bear in mind that people place a great deal of emphasis on the celebration of life. Africans are not concerned exclusively with asking God for some material benefits such as rain, children, good health and so on, but are also equally concerned with the need to celebrate life in thanksgiving for what they have received from God and the ancestors. To this end, African indigenous religious expressions are marked with festivals, feasts, dances, and recitation of myths whose objective is to strengthen the solidarity of the community.⁵⁰

In addition to the above, African Traditional Religion is characterised by the presence of religious specialists or intermediaries in the form of diviners, traditional healers, herbalists, rainmakers and spirit mediums. The priestly functions of these religious specialists consist of mediating between the people, on the one hand, and the supernatural beings on the other. These ritual authorities serve the purpose of establishing communication between the physical world and the spiritual world. They act as a go-between. But apart from playing the role of mediators, another function of these religious specialists is to provide healing services for all people in society and for all kinds of diseases. Healing in Africa, it is held, has to do with preservation or restoration of human vitality in the context of the community as a whole. To this end, one of the chief functions of religion in Africa is the healing of physical, spiritual and psychological diseases which affect the lives of many people, in conformity with the people's quest for good health, free from pain and suffering.⁵¹

Mention should also be made here of another factor which is common to many African indigenous religions. This is the recognition of the existence of sacred space

⁴⁹See B. Ray, "African Religions...", 90-100.

⁵⁰Newell S. Booth, "An Approach to African Religions," in *African Religions: A symposium*, ed. N. S. Booth (New York: NOKO Publishers, 1977), 8

⁵¹N. S. Booth, "An Approach...", 8

and sacred objects. This concept automatically divides the cosmos into two spheres, namely, the sphere of the sacred and of the profane. However, in African religious thought there is nothing profane in the cosmos. Practically everything is sacred in the sense that the profane participates fully in the sacred or spirit world. It is commonly believed that every human activity is performed in a mode in which human beings can participate in what Paul Tillich calls the Power of Being, Ground of Being or Being itself. This sacredness is the same, to a certain extent, as that expounded in Emile Durkheim's concept of religion though it pervades the entire spectrum of African society. In this context, it is not surprising that many African people hold certain places and objects as sacred. These range from mountains, rivers and forests to caves, stones, trees, and many others, as long as they are objects of revelation of the supernatural beings.⁵²

It should be noted here that another major element of African Traditional Religion is the prominent place occupied by agricultural, pastoral, fishing and hunting rituals, common in many African societies as a means of enhancing their economic state. The economy of many African peoples is based primarily on subsistence farming, fishing, hunting and pastoralism. In this regard, there is a great deal of emphasis on agricultural, fishing, hunting and pastoral rituals. These are carried out at appropriate times of the year. For example, among agricultural societies there are rituals that are performed during the time of sowing, testing the first fruits, and harvesting. These normally enhance the fertility of the land and ensure the availability of rain for crops, animals and human beings.⁵³

The Future of African Traditional Religion: Challenges and Prospects

It has been noted above that Africa is home to many World Religions, which for centuries have been competing for sacred space and membership. It has also been pointed out that the most dominant of these are African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. ATR forms the substructure of all other world religions on the African continent because it sprang from the African soil and it is not a missionary religion. Christianity and Islam are missionary religions and, consequently, their mission has been to convert the African people from their ancestral religion to either Christianity or Islam. African indigenous beliefs and practices, therefore, have been a battle field for conversion. A close examination of the relationship between ATR, on the one hand, and Christianity and Islam on the other, has revealed two models, namely, the Islamic model characterized by acceptance and accommodation and the Christian model characterized by rejection and conflict with African Traditional Religion.

⁵²The author identified a number of sacred places and objects during research on ATR both in Malawi and Botswana. Such places and objects are treated with great veneration.

⁵³The author, by means of participant observation, witnessed the rituals of offerings to God through the ancestors during intensive research in Malawi. Such rituals were also described to the author during research on ATR in Botswana.

The Islamic model: Acceptance and Accommodation

The relationship between African Traditional Religion and Islam in Africa has been an interesting one. The history of Islam in Africa has been well-documented by historiographers from all over the world and does not need to be repeated here. What should be noted, however, is that at the time of its inception in Africa, Islam adopted a strategy of acceptance and accommodation of African indigenous religious values in order to attract a large following to its fold. Islam in Africa was introduced primarily by Arabs through trade in ivory and slaves, *jihad*, colonialism and intermarriages in much of West, East and Central Africa.

It is important to note that in their missionary strategies the Arabs used the method of “indigenisation” or “contextualisation” in order to entrench themselves among the indigenous people. Intermarriages played a major role in the islamisation of many African countries in East and Central Africa. Arabs were an open society. They easily intermingled with the indigenous people wherever they settled in Africa, in the process of their trading activities. The Arabs also intermarried, to a certain extent, with the local people. In this way, Islam was internalised in the blood-stream of their hosts or subjects. The off-spring of such marriages formed a new Afro-Arabic society, which became the decisive force in the propagation of Islam in much of North, West, East and Central Africa.⁵⁴ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im has pointed out that the initial stages of the Islamisation of Africa south of the Sahara were characterized by co-existence and mutual accommodation between Islam and African Traditional Religion. The process of conversion and cultural transformation was very gradual, usually working through several generations, in either incorporating or accommodating Islamic institutions. The customary framework of African societies was initially retained intact. It was only with the passing of time that there was a gradual change in psychological attitudes towards social institutions, thereby remoulding life in an Islamic direction.⁵⁵ There is a great deal of historical evidence for this view. For instance, when the Arabs established themselves in places such Mogadishu, Mombasa, Zanzibar, Kilwa and other places in East Africa, they intermarried with Bantu women. As a result of such marriages, a new language and people were founded—the Swahili—who became largely responsible for the expansion of Islam in the Eastern African region.⁵⁶ In this context, the teaching of the Arabs and their Islamic itinerant preachers did not enforce strict Islam according to the teachings of the Quran or the requirements of the *sharia*. They did not demand that Africans should renounce their African religious traditions in order to be Muslims. In other words, Muslim clerics did not insist that Africans

⁵⁴Interview with Muhammad Habib, Bamangwato Village, Selebi-Phikwe, December 16, 1988.

⁵⁵Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, “Islam and human rights in Sahelian Africa,” in *African Islam and Islam in Africa*, eds. David Westerlund & Eva E. Rosander (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 82.

⁵⁶Geoffrey Parrinder, “The Religions of Africa,” *Africa South of the Sahara* (London: Europe Publications), 135.

should renounce their African-ness or break with the past. Those who embraced Islam as their new religion were considered as true Muslims immediately upon accepting the teachings of the new faith.

A close examination of the attitude of the Muslim Arabs towards local cultures seems to indicate that the early itinerant preachers and propagators of Islam in Africa were very sensitive to the cultures of the indigenous people. They did everything they could to preserve local cultures. It was hoped, however, that once Islam penetrated the blood stream of the African people, they would eventually discard their traditional beliefs and practices and adhere to a pure form of Islam. In the context of Islam in Malawi, in their teaching, Arabs and Muslim clerics required of their adherents to refrain from eating pork, monkeys, mice and animals whose cause of death was unknown, and urged their followers to eat *halal* meat. According to my respondents, when the Swahili Arabs arrived in the Malawi region they found that the indigenous people had several cultural and religious practices which were deeply rooted in the lives of the people. Arab teachers and itinerant preachers decided that instead of enforcing the rules of Islam by stopping people from practising the traditions of their ancestors, they could let them combine their own traditions and Islamic principles in order to make it easier for them to embrace Islam as their own faith. This process of inculturation or indigenisation of Islam covered a wide spectrum of Islamic beliefs and practices and a whole range of African Traditional Religions.

In order to attract people into the Islamic faith, Muslims clerics presented Islam to the African people as another version of African Traditional Religion. Indigenisation and accommodation led to the relaxation of certain Islamic rules in order to lure African converts to Islam. For example, in the context of Malawi, rules among Muslims regarding the drinking of intoxicating beverages are not strictly enforced. The veneration of ancestors through sacrifices and offerings, the use of divination, funeral rites, traditional healing, display and use of magical powers are not frowned upon.⁵⁷ In the same vein, elsewhere in Africa, Islamic principles were modified by pre-existing custom. This applied mainly to Islamic rules of inheritance, which were modified by local custom in order to continue the pre-Islamic practice of denying women shares in the estate of the deceased, to which they were entitled under the *sharia*. The traditional practice of widow inheritance was also retained, which is at variance with the *sharia* rules of marriage.⁵⁸

David Westerlund and Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi have pointed out that Islamic adaptation to African Traditional Religion took place in many parts of Africa. One of the best examples is in Tanzania where Islam clearly shows many local characteristics. According to Westerlund and Lodhi:

local practices and beliefs are often very obvious. In the interior it is sometimes hard to distinguish the dividing line between Islam and the indigenous religions. Prayers, the

⁵⁷J. N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religion in Malawi...*, 176-180.

⁵⁸A. A. An-Na'im, "Islam and Human Rights...", 82-83.

fasting month of Ramadan and other principles of official Islam are seldom strictly adhered to. Both religiously and culturally the Muslims of Tanzania have a strong local African identity.⁵⁹

This seems to confirm Stephen Neil's hypothesis that Islam in Africa showed the capacity for great penetration because it presented itself as an African religion and made fewer demands for change. It was able to take hold of the life of a whole tribe and refashion it within a very short time.⁶⁰ E. B. Idowu argues that, since its inception, Islam has tried very hard to establish itself as the universal religion of Africa.⁶¹ Lamin Sanneh has observed that one of the outcomes of this practice is that Africans have, for the most part, adopted the religious culture of Islam with regard to such things as dress, prayer, divination, baptismal and funerary rites, pilgrimage and the related feast of sacrifice, but have remained essentially tied to their own cultural ethos.⁶² Several scholars of Islam in Africa have indicated that the mixing of African beliefs and practices with Islamic elements is found in the nature of Islam itself. I. M. Lewis has put it succinctly thus:

in the Islamization of traditional belief, the most important aspect of Muslim religious phenomenology, which has greatly facilitated its initial impact and appeal, is its truly catholic recognition of the multiplicity of mystical power. As long as God's lofty preminence is not compromised, the Quran itself provides scriptural warrant for the existence of a host of subsidiary powers and spirits.⁶³

According to Lewis, there is in the Quran a voluminous store-house of angels, jins and devils and there are passages which justify their existence as a real phenomenon. In these passages, many traditional powers find a hospitable home. Consequently, for as long as traditional beliefs can be adjusted in such a way that they fall into place within a Muslim schema in which the absoluteness of Allah remains unquestioned, Islam does not ask its new converts to abandon their accustomed confidence in all their mystical forces.⁶⁴ G. E. von Grunebaum has pointed out that, by gradually drifting away from its canon law, Islam facilitated the integration into the Islamic community of alien communities by allowing them to carry over into the new faith much of their traditional way of life. Thus Islam provided a religious framework which was the more readily acceptable because, by and large, it did not insist on full compliance

⁵⁹Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi & D. Westerlund, "Tanzania," in *Islam outside the Arab world*, eds. D. Westerlund & I. Svanberg (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 100.

⁶⁰Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsmith: Penguin, 1964), 494.

⁶¹E. Bolaji Idowu, "The predicament of the Church in Africa," in *Christianity in Tropical Africa*, ed. C. G. Baeta (London: OUP, 1968), 432.

⁶²Lamin Sanneh, "The Domestication of Islam and Christianity in African Societies: A Methodological Exploration" in *Journal of Religion in Africa* Vol. XI, No.1 (1980), 3.

⁶³I. M. Lewis, *Islam in Tropical Africa* (London: OUP, 1966), 60.

⁶⁴I. M. Lewis, *Islam in Tropical Africa...*, 60.

with the absolute principles of Islam.⁶⁵ It is generally agreed that, by adjusting itself to the local conditions, Islam presented itself successfully as a native religion and not as a colonial import. The difference in the standard of living, so obvious in the case of Christians newly arrived from Europe, did not arise between Muslims and the local people who sprang from the same soil.⁶⁶

It would be fallacious, however, to assume that Islam in Africa has been completely at home with African Traditional Religion. There is evidence that from time to time *jihad* movements were launched in the 18th and 19th centuries, which promoted exclusive, legalistic, intolerant and militant Islam whose ideological orientation was to purify Islam from un-Islamic beliefs and practices. This created tension and conflict between Islam and African Traditional Religion. In contemporary Africa there has also been a move towards an exclusive Islam based purely on the prescriptions of the *Sharia*, which actually seeks to transform the African society and bring it into conformity with that model.⁶⁷ In the context of Malawi, this process started in the 1970s when the mixing of African religious beliefs and practices with Islamic principles came under attack from certain quarters of the Muslim community, as a result of Islamic reforms whose primary goal is to purify Islam from its syncretistic tendencies. This confrontation has come from one of the sections of the Muslim community commonly known as the *Shadhiliya* movement. This group of Muslims claims to represent orthodox Islam and observe strict disciplinarian procedures in several facets of their life. They consider themselves to be backed by the Quran and the *Sharia* both in their belief and practices. They therefore condemn and reject as unscriptural, and as manifestations of idolatry, many Islamic beliefs, rituals and ceremonies which have been appropriated from African Traditional Religion. The things that they condemn and reject include veneration of ancestors, rainmaking ceremonies, traditional forms of circumcision, initiation ceremonies for boys and girls, protective medicines, elaborate funerary rites, food prepared in honour of the departed, consulting rainmakers in times of drought and the like. The mixing of some of the above practices with Islamic principles is considered *shirk*, a sin for which there is no forgiveness.⁶⁸ Having said this, however, the general picture of the relationship between Islam and African indigenous religious expressions is one of acceptance and adaptation and this will, certainly, ensure the survival of ATR for ever.

⁶⁵G. E. von Grunebaum cited in Edward A. Alpers, "Towards a History of the Expansion of Islam in East Africa: The matrilineal peoples of the Southern Interior," in *The Historical Study of African Religion*, eds. Terence O. Ranger and I. N. Kimambo (London: Heinemann, 1972), 185.

⁶⁶E. van Donzel, B. Lewis and C. H. Petal, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Islam* Vol.4 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 176.

⁶⁷A. A. An-Na'im, "Islam and Human Rights...", 83.

⁶⁸J. N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religion in Malawi...*, 84-186.

The Christian Model: Rejection and Conflict

It appears that right from the start of missionary enterprise in Africa, the missionaries engaged themselves in an endless struggle against African Traditional Religion. Kirby, writing about the attitude of the early missionaries towards African Traditional Religion, has indicated that when the missionaries came to Africa they made no attempt to adapt themselves to African settings. Most missionaries were intolerant of anything that seemed to conflict with the form and content of the Christian tradition that they were bearing. On the whole, the missionaries knew very little of the culture, traditional values and religious beliefs of the people but instead strongly condemned everything in their way of life and religion.⁶⁹ Attacks on the ancient religion came from different angles. Writing about Catholic missionaries in West Africa, Kirby has this to say:

Catholic missionaries, like their Protestant brothers, were appallingly ignorant of African institutions and did not care to investigate them. Indeed, they were too busy suppressing traditional rituals and beliefs, thereby preventing an objective balanced view of African traditional religions. With few exceptions, missionaries saw traditional religions as a morass of bizarre beliefs and practices.⁷⁰

The same negative attitude towards African Traditional Religion was shared by sociologists, explorers and western thinkers. On the whole, the prevailing view was that the African people had never grasped the idea of a personal God. Although the approach towards a number of African traditional beliefs and practices has varied from one society to another and from one missionary group to another, it can be argued that “as a general principle...before 1960 all mission founded churches insisted that their converts abandon all contacts with African Traditional Religion and culture...Christian schools were established to demolish the old ways.”⁷¹ Kirby has noted that the attitude of the missionaries towards ATR can only be described as “cultural imperialism” whose objective was to annihilate African culture and religion.⁷²

It is important to point out that it is not surprising that the missionaries adopted such a negative attitude towards Africans and their culture. Practically all the missions were the brainchild of the evangelical revival movement of the 19th century. The evangelical revival imbued the minds of the missionaries with an unprecedented missionary zeal that moulded them into Christian soldiers whose primary objective was to proclaim the saving acts of Christ. African-ness was considered as a manifestation of the devil which was to be defeated and destroyed once and for all. P. C. Groves has intimated that in order to achieve this goal the missionaries made a passionate appeal to the Africans to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ. They emphasised human accountability before God and the redemption that was available to all by faith in Christ the saviour of the world. The moral ideals of the Christian faith were persistently and

⁶⁹J. P. Kirby, “Cultural Change and Religious Conversion...,” 59-60.

⁷⁰J. P. Kirby, “Cultural Change and Religious Conversion...,” 60.

⁷¹J. P. Kirby, “Cultural Change and Religious Conversion...,” 61.

⁷²J. P. Kirby, “Cultural Change and Religious Conversion...,” 65.

insistently presented to the Africans, and African values that were in conflict with the Christian demands were denounced openly.⁷³ Alec R. Vidler has reminded us of the main motive of missions. He writes:

The main motive of missions in the nineteenth century was the evangelical one, common to Protestants and Roman Catholics, of rescuing as many of the heathen as possible from the everlasting damnation which otherwise awaited them. The grand object was to save as many souls as possible for eternal life in the next world. The simple view that everything in non-Christian religions and cultures was evil dominated the missionary outlook for a long time, though individuals were of course more humane than their creeds.⁷⁴

It appears that during the age of European imperialism the missionaries, consciously or unconsciously, represented the European colonial powers, in the same way as the traders and the administrators. Although this might not have been in their minds, the peoples of Africa perceived this to be the case. It could not be otherwise, for the missionaries came as agents of the same culture as that of the colonial administrators. The missionaries were exporters of European religions as the administrators were of European methods of administration. Alec Vidler has pointed out that in the whole missionary work “a foreign, an imperial or colonial aroma hung about most mission stations.”⁷⁵ It is now very clear that the missionaries seem to have known very little, if anything, of the basic African religious ideas, which would have enabled them to present the gospel in terms understood by the Africans. This lack of understanding of the intrinsic values of African culture was based on the missionaries’ attitude towards other cultures, which were considered to be inferior to their own.

It is a well-known fact that the missionaries considered all African Traditional Religions as archaic. The primary task of the missionary societies was to replace African belief systems with the good news of salvation. For example, when missionaries arrived in Angola in the 1870s and 1880s they dismissed African Traditional Religion as superstition since it lacked the main features of Western religions such as doctrinal statements, ecclesiastical structures and scriptures. The first missionaries criticised ancestor worship among the Angolans, telling them that God is not the God of the dead but of the living (Mt.22: 32).⁷⁶ Both Catholics and Protestants tended to think that all non-Christians were destined for hell. This was reflected in the writings of many missionaries. For example, Robert Moffatt, writing about Batswana, described them as a vast funeral procession going down sadly and slowly, but certainly to the regions of woe. He considered them as idolaters whose destiny was the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone.⁷⁷ These sentiments were also shared by David Livingstone in his writings about the Kololo.

⁷³Quoted in E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1995), 271.

⁷⁴Alec R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1961), 252.

⁷⁵Alec R. Vidler, *The Church...*, 251.

⁷⁶L. Hendersen, *The Church in Angola*, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1992, 22.

⁷⁷E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 81.

The missionaries saw themselves primarily as messengers from God the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ who, they were strongly convinced, rejected African Traditional Religions and African values because, in their estimation, they were not salvific but only led people to death and eternal damnation. Robert Moffatt made this point clear in his conversations with Mzilikazi the chief of the Ndebele when he told him that he (Moffatt) was a teacher from God who had come to teach the Ndebele, who knew not God, about the God who was the creator of all things and the governor among the nations and about the rewards and the punishment that awaited the dead beyond death.⁷⁸

Stephen Neil has observed that Robert Moffatt's chief weakness was his failure to enter into dialogue with African Traditional Religion for, despite his love for the Africans, he had little interest in the background of their thought. He underestimated their religious traditions and introduced unaltered the fervent evangelical Christianity of his own tradition, without considering the possibilities of its adaptation to an African world.⁷⁹

It has been argued in certain quarters that modern scholars tend to condemn expatriate missionaries unfairly, accusing them of Eurocentricity and of condemnation of indigenous cultures. It is pointed out that it was almost inevitable that they should adopt this position because the newly-arrived missionaries could not be instant experts on African languages and cultures, and the incarnation of Christianity in different African cultures involved a great multiplicity of choices that, ultimately, could be made only by Africans themselves.⁸⁰

The problem, however, resides in the fact that missionaries and their co-workers in the field tended to identify Christianity with Western culture in such a manner that the two seemed inseparable. In the past, as is the case today, missionaries and fellow workers in the field tended to oppose African practices that were sometimes morally neutral. In some societies the wearing of discs in the ears or numerous chains on the neck, removing the incisor teeth and braiding men's hair with fibre was frowned upon.⁸¹ In certain quarters, missionaries criticised domestic architecture of circular homes and insisted that they should be square houses.⁸² Some European women missionaries tried to impose on African women Victorian stereotypes of the ideal female who eats, sleeps and drinks little so that she does not grow fat.⁸³

Missionaries also criticised polygamy, levirate, sororate and ghost marriages, divination, veneration of ancestors, rainmaking ceremonies, bride price, beer drinking, agricultural festivals, initiation ceremonies, traditional healers, traditional medicine, spirit mediums and the like. Christianity was in conflict not only with popular traditional practices but also with well-organized religious institutions such as territorial cults. For example, missionaries came into conflict with the Mbasi cult among the Nyakusa in the

⁷⁸E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 271.

⁷⁹S. Neil, *A history...*, p313.

⁸⁰E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 82.

⁸¹E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 82-3.

⁸²E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 83.

⁸³E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 8.

Southern Highlands in Tanzania; the cult of Bravo, a national god, at Asafa near Cape Coast; the cult of Egun, an invisible religious personage, in Sierra Leone; the cult of Moana Mbinyi, an ancient king of the Lozi, in Zambia; the Nyau cult among the Chewa in Central Malawi and the Bimbi cult among the Chewa in Southern Malawi. They were considered to be manifestations of Satan.⁸⁴

The negative effects of the missionary strategy were deplored by the historian P. C. Groves. In his writings he pointed out that this strategy would be likely to retard the advances of Christianity instead of accelerating it. He noted that the inadequacy of the preparation of the missionaries who undertook missionary work in Africa led to the unfortunate situation whereby the missionary just reproduced overseas what he had grown up in and learned to value for himself at home. He confidently regarded his social inheritance, coupled with his own ecclesiastical tradition, as the norm for a good life and sound churchmanship, and stigmatised what was African as bad just on those grounds, without perceiving the necessity of further investigation.⁸⁵

It is important to note that with the advent of independence for many African countries in the second half of the twentieth century, things could not remain the same. The relentless attack on African religious expression began to subside. The change of heart is attributed to the "African Cultural Revolution" that has characterised most African countries since independence. This has enabled many Africans to take their African identity very seriously. Kirby, writing in the context of the Anufo people of Ghana, has observed that "the new identity, while taking its past seriously, is not solely a traditional or tribal one, but one that gels with the Western world without being a second-class imitation of it."⁸⁶

It is noteworthy that as a result of the African people's assertion of cultural identity, significant changes towards African Traditional Religion have taken place in both Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches. On the Protestant side, National Christian Councils, All Africa Conference of Churches and the World Council of Churches have, in recent years, promoted dialogue between Christians and adherents of ATR. To this end, a number of conferences have been held, designed to examine closely the nature of ATR and how its values can be adapted and integrated in Christian teaching and practice.⁸⁷

On the side of the Roman Catholic Church, change has taken place since independence and Vatican II. It is characterised by a limited dialogue and an ecumenical spirit towards other religions. Most importantly, there has been a gradual re-evaluation

⁸⁴James N. Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999), 135-148.

⁸⁵C. P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, Vol. 3, 1955, 287-8

⁸⁶Kirby, "Cultural Change and Religious Conversion....", 65.

⁸⁷This has been discussed fully in Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement....* 193-198.

of African Traditional Religion, as a result of the Roman Catholic Church's awareness of its identity as a World Church.⁸⁸

By and large, it appears that at present there is a window of opportunity for the survival of African Traditional Religion on the following counts: first, the onslaught of the missionaries on ATRs has diminished, thanks to the "cultural revolution" since independence; secondly, Christian churches, Catholic and Protestant alike, have begun to appreciate African religious values and spirituality, which reflect genuine African experience of the divine. This, it appears, is likely to ensure the continuity of ATR in time and space. Now that there is a meaningful dialogue between ATR on the one hand and Christianity on the other, it gives the student of ATR a legitimate reason to deepen his/her knowledge of this very important ancient religion in Africa, without which Africans would lose their identity and authenticity.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to introduce the student to the study of African Traditional Religion. It has been noted that ATR is a subject of study in its own right and that it is as important as any other academic subject. The chapter has attempted a definition of ATR, and has discussed its nature, and its importance in African societies. The chapter has also examined the reasons for studying ATR, sources for the study of ATR, theoretical approaches in the study of ATR as well as major elements of ATR. Finally, the chapter has examined the relationship between ATR and other world religions, namely Islam and Christianity.

⁸⁸ Kirby, "Cultural Change and Religious Conversion...", 65.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Christianity in Africa in the 20th Century

Fidelis Nkomazana

Introduction and Background Information

The chapter investigates Christianity in the 20th century when Africa became central to global Christianity. Various themes will be examined in a variety of regional contexts. The chapter will, among other things, explore African indigenous/initiated/independent churches that have indigenized Christianity to suit their own cultural and theological needs. It will also look at the reasons these churches were created. Together with Pentecostal Churches and the Charismatic movement, they are the fastest growing Churches in Africa.

The history of Christianity in Africa south of the Sahara begins in the fifteenth century, with the arrival of the first missionaries carrying the gospel from Europe.¹ The story of these missionaries is just as much Catholic as it is Protestant, and women and men missionaries are equally represented. Unlike most histories written on African Church history, that present a male dominated picture, this chapter acknowledges that women were as equally in the forefront of missions as men.

The Portuguese were the first to introduce a Catholic form of Christianity to the Congo (Central Africa) between the 16th and 18th centuries, but the results did not last. It was at the end of the 18th century that the Evangelical Revival began to bring to Africa an influx of missionaries, whose work produced a lasting Christian presence in Sub-Sahara Africa. It is in the 20th century that we see the church in Africa firmly established. The most important factor in the spread of Christianity in Africa during the 20th century was the role played by African Christians. A major difference between the western missionaries and the African missionaries was that the former regularly sent letters to their relatives and mission boards, and financial reports to supporters in their home countries, while the latter rarely recorded their stories. As a result, we know far more about western missionaries than we do about the African evangelists,

¹A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa: 1540-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 71-86.

who in actual fact played a significant role in bringing Christianity to different parts of Africa.²

Another important piece of background information that needs to be mentioned here is the fact that Christianity first arrived in North Africa in the 1st or 2nd century, where Christian communities were among the earliest in the world. This was around the same time, or possibly before, Christianity spread to Northern Europe. From North Africa, Christianity spread slowly to Ethiopia. In the 4th century A.D., the Ethiopian King Ezana made Christianity the kingdom's official religion. This was at almost the same time as Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, of which North Africa was a part. In the 7th century, Christianity retreated under the advance of Islam, but it remained intact in the Ethiopian Empire and survived in some spots in North Africa.³ In the 15th century Christianity came to Sub-Saharan Africa with the arrival of the Portuguese. In the South of the continent, the Dutch founded the beginnings of the Dutch Reform Church in 1652.⁴

Despite these developments during the 1st to 15th centuries, until the 19th century the majority of the populations in the interior of the continent continued to follow the African traditional religions undisturbed. Adrian Hastings observed that at that time Christian missions to Africa increased, due to the inspiration of a campaign against slavery and the interest in colonising Africa. However, where people had already converted to Islam, Christianity had little success, because of the opposition mounted by the authorities.⁵

It was, however, in the 20th century that it became evident that Christianity was an agent of great change in Africa. It destabilized the status quo, brought new opportunities to some, but undermined the power of others. With Christianity came education, literacy, human rights and justice.⁶ However, it must be mentioned that the spread of Christianity also contributed to colonialism in most parts of Africa. One other important observation that needs to be made is that the missionary form of Christianity denied people pride in their culture and ceremonies.⁷

The Major Groups of Churches in Africa

The 20th century African churches can be divided into five main groups. There are differences and similarities between the groups, as well as discontinuities within and from within each of them.

The first two are the missionary churches of Catholic and Protestant background; the second two groups are the African Independent Churches and the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches; the fifth group is the Seventh Day Adventists.

²A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 260-261, 394-604.

³Isichei, 1995: 13 - 44

⁴A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 71-86.

⁵A. Hastings, 1994: 123 - 129

⁶A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 188-194.

⁷A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 309.

Missionary Churches

Missionary churches, founded by Roman Catholic missionary orders and Protestant missionaries, retain significant identification with western churches. Whilst the Roman Catholic churches largely maintain the Catholic Church's emphasis on the unity and authority of the Church, the Protestants retain the authority of the Bible and the need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour. The African Protestants include churches such as the Methodists, Lutherans, Dutch Reformed Churches, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and the Anglican Communion.⁸

African Independent Churches and Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches

The Pentecostal mission churches under African leadership, virtually indistinguishable at a glance from the African Independent Churches (hereafter referred to as AICs), are sometimes classified on their own whereas other scholars categorise them with the AICs. In this chapter, for a number of reasons, Pentecostal churches are presented as a group separate from both the missionary churches and the African Independent Churches. Firstly, because they themselves do not want to be categorised together with the AICs, and secondly because their theology, rituals and practices are distinctive from those of the AICs, so much so that in many parts of Africa they are even winning members from the AICs. Thirdly, the leadership of the AICs does not regard itself as Pentecostal. They clearly distinguish themselves from the Pentecostals by calling them the "the Born Again" or "the English Churches", due to the fact that the Pentecostals mainly prefer to use English, as opposed to the indigenous languages of various African peoples. The fourth reason they are presented as different groups results from their attire, practices and beliefs. The AICs use elaborate uniforms and conduct healing practices that involves the use of water and other articles, whereas Pentecostals mainly use prayer and faith; some AICs have no problems relating with ancestors, whereas Pentecostals are clearly anti-ancestors.

Seventh Day Adventists

The Seventh-day Adventist Church (hereafter referred to as SDA) is a Christian organization with a worldwide membership of over 14 million and an active presence in most African countries.⁹ It emphasises the imminent second coming (or "Advent") of Jesus, and the observance of the "seventh day" of the week (Saturday) as the Sabbath. The denomination grew out of the Millerite movement in the United States of America during the middle part of the 19th century, and was formally established in 1863.¹⁰ Among its founders was Ellen G. White, whose extensive writings are still held in high regard by the church today.

⁸A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 256-257.

⁹Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventh-day_Adventist_Church, Re-accessed on the website on 28th April, 2010.

¹⁰http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventh-day_Adventist_Church

The SDA church is closely aligned to Protestantism, although some critics regard it as a sectarian movement. Its theology corresponds to key evangelical teachings such as the Trinity and the infallibility of Scripture, but it does not itself agree to being classified as Protestant or Catholic. The SDA church first entered Africa in 1894 when it started mission work in the Gold Coast (Ghana), West Africa, Zimbabwe and South Africa. World-wide, 39% of Adventists are African. East–Central Africa, with 2.1 million adherents, is one of the regions of the world with the largest SDA church membership.¹¹ SDA work places great emphasis on various aspects of human and community freedom, involvement and responsibility. These include: religious liberty and human rights, humanitarian aid and development projects for better lifestyles and improved living standards, the promotion of health through the building of hospitals and clinics, education and personal growth, as well as social issues.¹² The church runs some of the largest Protestant education systems in the world. SDAs also run a wide network of hospitals, clinics, sanatoriums and other health-related institutions in Africa.¹³

The Explosion of Christianity in Africa: Phase 1

Experts in African Christianity, such as Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh,¹⁴ estimate that by the middle of this century over one third of the Christians in the world will live in Africa, and, of this number, more than half will belong to African Independent Churches and Pentecostal churches. In the 20th century, the African Christian population exploded from an estimated eight or nine million in 1900 (8 to 9% of all Christians in the world) to some 335 million in 2000 (45%). Other statistics, of 2006 and 2007, are as follows:

Christian Population in Africa ¹⁵				
Region	Total Population	Christians	% Christian	% of total of Christians world-wide
Central Africa	91,561,875	55,668,811	60.80	2.56
East Africa	225,488,566	105,851,560	46.94	4.87
North Africa	161,963,837	10,358,490	6.40	0.48
Southern Africa	137,092,019	80,278,746	58.56	3.70
West Africa	269,935,590	85,383,474	31.63	3.93
Total	886,041,887	337,541,081	38.10	5.25

¹¹<http://news.adventist.org>: Re-accessed on the website on 28th April, 2010.

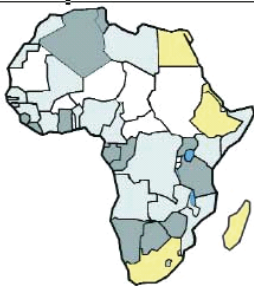
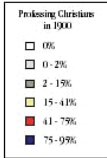
¹²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventh-day_Adventist_Church: Re-accessed on the website on 28th April, 2010.

¹³A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 256-257.

¹⁴See Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The religious impact* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983)

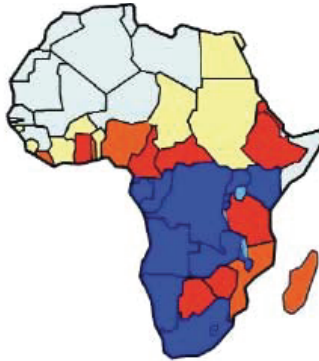
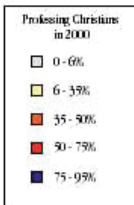
¹⁵Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Africa tagged since March 2007: Re-accessed on the 28th April 2010.

1900



This marked a shift in the “centre of gravity of Christianity” from the West to the non-western world.¹⁶ This unprecedented growth of Christianity is further illustrated below:

2000



At the turn of the 20th century, Christianity was virtually nonexistent in many parts of Africa but is now, as the following figures show, the faith of the majority:¹⁷

	% Christian in 1900	% Christian in 2000
Congo-Zaire	1.4	95.4
Angola	0.6	94.1
Swaziland	1.0	86.9
Zambia	0.3	82.4
Kenya	0.2	79.4
Malawi	1.8	76.8

¹⁶ The Overseas Ministries Study Center; David Barrett: Quoted in <http://chi.gospelcom.net/GLIMPSEF/Glimpses/glimps151.shtml> <http://search.msn.com/results.aspx?srch=105&FORM=AS5&q=David+Barrett%2c+The+overseas+ministries+study+centre>: Accessed in August 2008.

¹⁷ Quoted in <http://chi.gospelcom.net/GLIMPSEF/Glimpses/glimps151.shtml>: Accessed in August 2010.

Other African countries with a significant Christian population are:¹⁸

Seychelles	96.9%	Equatorial Guinea	76.6%
Saint Helena	96.2%	Central African Republic	67.8%
Sao Tomé & Príncipe	95.8%	Zimbabwe	67.5%
Cape Verde Islands	95.1%	Botswana	59.9%
Namibia	92.3%	Cameroon	54.2%
Burundi	91.7%	Ethiopia	57.7%
Congo-Brazzaville	91.2%	Ghana	55.4%
Lesotho	91%	Eritrea	50.5%
Gabon	90.6%	Tanzania	50.4%
Uganda	88.7%	Madagascar	49.5%
South Africa	83.1%	Nigeria	45.9%
Rwanda	82.7%	Togo	42.6%
Spanish North Africa	80.3%		

This information does not show the development of Christianity during the age of colonialism, at the beginning of the 19th century, when the slave trade traffic was slowly coming to an end. At that time there were only a few pockets of Christianity in Africa. There was a small community of Coptic Christians in Egypt. There were also small communities in the Cape region of South Africa where Dutch settlers had lived since 1652. In addition, there were small Christian communities in the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique. The largest Christian community at that time was in Ethiopia.¹⁹ The figures and the maps, however, show how from 1900 to 2000 Christianity rapidly expanded in Africa. It also shows that at the beginning of the 21st century, over forty percent of the African population identified themselves as Christian. In 1950 there were at least 23 million Christians in Africa. Of these, estimates show that they were composed of 11 million Roman Catholics, 10 million Protestants, and 2 million members of independent churches. The Congo was the heart of Catholic Africa, with 1 million Catholics in Uganda and 700,000 in Tanganyika. The West (from Senegal through Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, to Cameroon), with one and half million, had comparatively few.²⁰

Of the 10 million Protestants (including Anglicans) about half were in South Africa. There was also a remarkably strong church developing in the Belgian Congo, with about one and half million adherents. Interestingly, here the colonial government had been least favourable. The missionaries' independence from the colonial government made their form of Christianity attractive in the eyes of Africans.²¹

One other important point that needs to be mentioned here is that there were fewer Protestants than Catholics in French Africa and Portuguese Africa. The Roman

¹⁸<http://chi.gospelcom.net/GLIMPSEF/glmps151.shtml>: Accessed in August 2010.

¹⁹E. Isichei, *A history of Christianity in Africa from antiquity to the present* (London: SPCK, 1995), 2-52 & 211-217.

²⁰A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity 1950-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 43

²¹A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity...*, 44.

Catholic work had been given privileged status by both the French and the Portuguese at that time. But in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa the Protestants were considerably more numerous. In South Africa alone, there were over a million non-white Methodists, 750,000 Anglicans, 550,000 Dutch Reformed and 45,000 Lutherans. Congregationalists in South Africa and Botswana totalled over 200,000, largely due to the work of the London Missionary Society.²² In Namibia, Tanzania and the Cameroon, where the German and Scandinavian missionaries worked devotedly for decades, there was also a strong Lutheran presence. The Swedish Mission had built up a sizeable church in the French Congo and Brazzaville. The Paris Evangelical Missionary Society had worked in Lesotho and Zambia. The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa worked in Nigeria, Malawi, Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. The Basel Mission, the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland, under the umbrella of the Presbyterian Missions, worked in Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and South Africa. The Baptist Missions were strongest in Congo and Northern Angola and also present in Nigeria and Cameroon. The Anglicans were working in every part of British Africa, except Rwanda and Burundi. They were strong in Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya and Malawi, Ghana and Zimbabwe. The Methodists were widely spread across the continent and not confined only to the British Empire.²³

Three Stages of the Growth of Christianity

Historically, African Christianity south of the Sahara Desert has moved through three phases, or generations: pre-colonial Christianity (1450-1890); the 1890s to 1960; and the 1960s to the present.

Portuguese Catholics were the first Europeans to venture south of the Sahara Desert in significant numbers. However, in order to further discuss the developments of 20th century African Christianity, this section of the chapter will concentrate on the period beginning with the year 1900.

From 1900s to the 1960s

Early in the 19th century Europeans and Americans began to arrive in Africa and set up mission villages and stations throughout Africa. These missionaries tended to be non-denominational in their view of the missionary enterprise and thus ecumenical in their approach. Once they reached the interior, they had no choice but to integrate into the local culture as best they could. In fact, the period from the 1890s to the 1960s saw Christianity developing within an environment of colonial Africa. Colonialism had a great impact on the nature of African missionaries, and, at the same time, on African Christianity. By the early 1900s missionaries were either closely co-operating with various European powers, or standing in opposition against them. Because African rulers were no longer the primary political powers, missionaries decided not to be

²²A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity...*, 44.

²³A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity...*, 44-45.

subject to their authority. Instead, they now identified with the colonizing European powers. The colonial rulers were happy to use missionaries as part of their machinery to subdue and control Africans.²⁴ European education was one of the key factors that made this possible; it became a new political reality and the link between convert, missionary and colonial government. While colonial administration did lead to a great demand for education, missionaries had stressed literacy, education and the reading of the Bible right from the beginning of their missions. The arrival of colonial power resulted in literacy gaining social, political and economic status, not merely religious importance. For their part, missionaries monopolized the schools, and their education became a major attraction for new converts. Unlike the first generation of African converts, who were largely ex-slaves, refugees and social outcasts finding safe haven in mission villages,²⁵ the educated Christians tended to be young, educated and powerful traders, clerks, or migrant workers. The importance of education led to the growth of the church, and to African catechists and evangelists. However, not much was done practically to prepare and train African church leaders. Failure of the western missionaries to equip and recognize local leadership, in some instances due to racism and the tendency to maintain control over African Christians, led to frustration, and to many of the new generation of educated Protestant Christians breaking away from missionary control to form AICs in the 20th century.²⁶ But before we discuss that, the events and developments that led to the great transformations and growth of African Christianity between the 1900 and 1960 needs further examination.

The Growth of the Roman Catholic Church in Africa

The major developments within the Catholic Church took place in two important phases:

Catholic-Colonial Government Relations from the 1900s to the 1960s

This marked the first phase, which began in the 1900s and ended in the 1960s. During the 1900s the Roman Catholic missionaries found themselves at odds with their colonial governments. Most of the Catholic colonizing countries discouraged a missionary presence. The Protestant missionaries, unlike the Catholics, were working as partners of the colonial powers. Belgian authorities, for instance, prohibited Catholic missionaries from entering the Congo, despite permitting several Protestant missionaries to work there. While the Belgian Catholic missionaries increased steadily in 1908, this close and supportive relationship was to the detriment of their work because there was too much political control. The Portuguese colonies, Angola and Mozambique, had relatively little Christian presence, either Catholic or Protestant. In French West Africa, at first virtually all the missionaries were French Catholics and supported by the French

²⁴F. Nkomazana, "London Missionary Society, Church and State in Colonial Bechuanaland: The Case of the Bangwato, 1857-1923," *Scriptura: International Journal on Bible, Religion and Theology* 71:4 (1999): 303-312.

²⁵E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 71-72.

²⁶E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 397-492.

government, in order to ensure their compliance in the work of colonial pacification. A problem arose from the fact that although the missionaries complied, their first loyalty was to the pope. In response to this, the French government turned anti-clerical, ending diplomatic relations with the Vatican, as well as expelling the religious orders from France and ending subsidies to the missionaries in the colonies in Africa. The missionaries, who were nevertheless permitted to remain, found their new relationship with the colonial administration extremely unhelpful.²⁷

As part of a response to these developments, the Catholic Church aimed at forming self-propagating, self-governing and self-supporting local clergy and churches that were strongly tied to the traditional Roman Catholic hierarchy.²⁸ Despite this initiative, the Catholic missionaries continued to control the African Catholic community until after the 1950s. While Catholic missionaries in Africa became careful students of African culture, they also addressed political and social issues and continued to control African Catholic communities and leadership. Whereas they maintained control over the African Catholic community which they had planted, it was evident that most African Catholics owed their conversion to black African catechists, who were largely untrained and not ordained. The catechists were therefore responsible for the remarkable church growth and development, and for the huge increase in the numbers of fellow African Christians. For example, in Igboland (Southern Nigeria), the Catholic community grew from 5,000 in 1900 to 74,000 in 1912 due to the role of African catechists. The European missionaries had developed Catholic schools in order to maintain the rapidly growing community. The Catholic education, catechists and teachers were converting even more Africans into the Catholic community in the 1960s.²⁹

The Roman Catholic Vatican Council II in the 1960s

The two important factors, decolonization and the Second Vatican Council, jointly revolutionized and greatly impacted the Catholic community in Africa from the 1960s onwards. These processes helped the Catholic Christians to play an active role in political and social issues. The second, and possibly the most important and outstanding factor within the Roman Catholic Church was, however, the Vatican Council II (1962-5), which in fact benefitted from the end of colonialism. This was one of the most significant ecclesiastical events ever, and contributed to the development of African Christianity. It greatly accelerated the development of African clergy and led to an African Catholicism dominated by African clerical and lay leadership, while at the same time sending African clergy throughout the world to form part of the great international mix of clergy.³⁰

²⁷A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 431.

²⁸A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 293-398.

²⁹E. Isichei, *A history of Christianity...*, 221-227.

³⁰C. G. Baeta, *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968),

The major achievements of Vatican II included the use of the vernacular, rather than Latin, in worship, and the opening of the door to inter-religious relations—unity and co-operation between Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians. The use of the vernacular liturgy and the development of African hymnody and instrumentation were the key African Catholic responses to Vatican II. The most important single effect of the Council on Africa has been the change in singing, in hymns, in music, and in the use of musical instruments. While the pre-Conciliar African church set its heart on the possession of a harmonium, the post-Conciliar African Church glories in its use of African drums.³¹ Vatican II also permitted, and even encouraged, African Catholic Christians to read Protestant vernacular translations of the Bible. This further contributed to the growth and spread of Catholicism in Africa. Africans could read the Bible to their own communities in their own languages, and propagate Christianity to the remotest areas, areas that could not be reached by European missionaries.

Vatican II, which contributed immensely to the growth of the church in the 20th century also made the Church more firmly western in its modernity. Whilst on the one hand the Church reduced her approval of healing shrines, holy water, statues and candles, she on the other hand also removed the points of contact between traditional African religions and Catholic Christianity, changes which were resisted by African Catholic Christians.³² Vatican II also encouraged the development of local ecclesiastical leadership, which was facilitated by their independence from colonial domination and the development of local leadership. The European and American priests and bishops in the 1960s enthusiastically embraced the principles of Vatican II and worked practically to develop African liturgies, hymns and musical styles. By the early 1970s they had begun to leave Africa, handing over their leadership positions to Africans. By the African Synod of 1994, 90% of the hierarchy was African. However, and unfortunately, the African bishops became more conservative than their white predecessors. This coincided with a political shift from the independence of the 1960s to an increasingly repressive series of regimes in the 1970s. The bishops in Uganda under Idi Amin, in the Congo/Zaire under Mabutu Seseko, in Ethiopia under Mengistu Mariam, and in the Sudan, Angola and Mozambique found themselves persecuted and martyred.³³

Institutionally, the 1970s saw the Catholic Church in Africa recover its understanding of the importance of catechists. These lay and married church leaders, who were in charge of village churches, and responsible for teaching the basics of the Christian faith and leading weekly worship, were responsible for the spread of Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries.

³¹A. Hastings, *African Catholicism: Essays in Discovery* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 128-129.

³²A. Hastings, *African Catholicism...*, 128-9.

³³<http://www.persecution.org/suffering/index.php>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution_of_Christians <http://www.bibleleague.org/persecuted/africapapers.php>

The overthrow of repressive African regimes in the 1990s gave the church a chance to regroup. In 1994, for instance, the African church gathered in a historic and important Synod, held in Rome. At that notable event, the leader of the African Synod, Pope John Paul II, defined the church as the Family of God. That African Synod worked to develop and inculturate this image in the African context. The participants stressed the need to inculturate Christianity in the areas of liturgy, marriage, and reverence for ancestors. Particular emphasis was placed on the issue of marriage. They struggled to incorporate the sacramental blessing of the Church into the traditional marriage ceremony, the validity of which the church did not recognize. While the Catholic understanding of marriage is as a sacrament, permanent from the moment the church pronounces the couple as husband and wife, the African concept includes things such as exchange of *lobola* (bride price), fertility of the wife etc.³⁴

Mixed marriages, traditional marriages, polygamous marriages, or even simply marriages that were not solemnized in church for lack of a priest at the crucial moment, all prevent even devout Catholic Christians from participating in communion. Barring large numbers of obviously devout Christians from the sacraments further marginalized the importance of the sacraments to ordinary Catholics worshipping under the leadership of their catechist.³⁵

Another important event that took place when the bishops were meeting at Rome in the synod of 1994, was that African Catholics became embroiled in what may be the worst moment in the history of the Church in Africa. Throughout the course of 1994, Catholic Christians, some of them in leadership roles, played a major role in inciting racial hatred and genocidal violence in Rwanda. The majority of both Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda were Catholic, so much of the genocide involved Catholic Christians slaughtering other Catholic Christians, frequently as the victims sought sanctuary in Churches.³⁶ The Church was unable, or, in some cases, unwilling to control the violence. To address this negative past, the Church has with hope and optimism set itself the task of confession, repentance, and reconciliation.³⁷

The Protestants Missions in Africa from the 1900s to the Present

The growth of Protestant Christianity in Africa was evident at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. For example, the revival that swept through the Ugandan Protestant community towards the end of the 19th century led to large numbers of missionary catechists and evangelists being sent out. Their work was so successful that Baganda was 40% Christian and the rest of Uganda 7% Christian by 1911.³⁸

³⁴A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa*..., 317-325.

³⁵A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa*..., 317-325, 398.

³⁶<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/etc/script.html>; <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/misc/reeves12.html> <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/misc/verkuy1.html>

³⁷Hastings, *The Church in Africa*.... 317-325, 398.

³⁸J. Bauer, *2000 years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1994), 22-38.

The 20th century Ugandan church has become very diverse, with strong Anglican and Catholic communities, large numbers of various Protestant mission denominations and a significant number of prophetic churches and other kinds of African initiated churches.³⁹ The growth of the African Anglican Communion is one good example of the developments that were taking place within the Protestant wing of the African church. Like the Catholic Church, the churches of the Anglican Communion developed strong local African leadership within the various national Anglican provinces, as well as a stronger voice in the worldwide Anglican Communion. At almost the same time, Western mission turned to medical work and community development work, leaving the preaching and evangelism to African Christians, a development which became dominated by non-denominational or interdenominational para-church organizations.⁴⁰

The history of African Protestantism in the first half of the 20th century shows how different Protestant communities emerged from mission stations and missionary operations. The attitude of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 to fundamentalist para – church missions played a major role in shaping the 20th century Protestant Missions. Unlike Catholic missions and the Catholic Christian community, which was presented as a coherent whole, Protestantism was as divided in Africa as in Europe and America.

Factors Impacting the Growth of the Church in the 20th Century

Several factors were responsible for the growth of both the Catholic and Protestant missions. These factors can be summarized as follows.⁴¹

Improved Transportation

The 20th century saw the coming of a new generation of missionaries who, through the vastly improved transportation networks which accompanied colonization, became far more mobile. They could reach their mission stations quickly, easily and comfortably by train and road.

Westernization

These missionaries were far more westernized than their predecessors had been, since they went home on furlough far more often. While a significant number of 19th century missionaries baptized polygamous converts, very few 20th century missionaries were willing to accept polygamy in their flock.

³⁹E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 45-150; A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 171-184.

⁴⁰E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 341-344.

⁴¹A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 258-298.

Evangelical Zeal

The number of missionaries and mission agencies increased in the 20th century, driven by the example of David Livingstone, the increased interest in Africa due to the Scramble for Africa, and changes in European and American Christianity that led to greater attention to preaching the gospel to all nations.⁴²

Increase in Women Missionaries

Far more single women came as missionaries in the 20th century than in the 19th, for the simple reason that the mission agencies became willing to accept single women as missionaries. These single women, in turn, found that the mission field enabled them to preach, teach and practise medicine, while in Europe or America they would be limited largely to domestic duties.⁴³

Specialized Medical Missions

The 20th century Protestant Missions were mainly characterized by the development of medical missions. Nineteenth century missionaries, most of whom had little or no formal training, acted as jacks of all trades—as well as converting Africans to Christianity, they were school teachers and medical practitioners. Their healing arts were seen as part and parcel of the gospel they were bringing, whether they were conscious of it or not. The 20th century introduced specialization whereby trained missionary doctors and nurses set up hospitals and clinics and left the preaching of the Gospel to trained ministers. Specialization, however, tended to weaken and secularize the ministry since spiritual health and physical health were intimately connected for many Africans.⁴⁴

Education and Bible Translation

Protestant missionaries had stressed literacy and education from the very beginning of their work in Africa. Translation of the Bible into the language of the people among whom they lived was seen as their first task. The first task for converts was to learn to read, so they could read the Word of God for themselves and teach it to their own people. This was seen as the most powerful tool for spreading Christianity to the remotest places where European and American missionaries could not go. The work of translation, in turn, shaped and enabled many cultures to write down and preserve elements of their oral history and literature. Literacy also gave Christians great power in the new colonial world. As the colonial powers asserted themselves, literacy and mission education became an increasingly valuable and sought-after social commodity. Families and communities who could send one of their children to a mission school were assured of financial prosperity and social prestige. On the other hand, the mission

⁴²A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 250-253.

⁴³A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 260-261.

⁴⁴A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 275-282.

also benefitted because nearly every child enrolled in a mission school became a Christian. The mission school became the second most important source of Christian converts in Africa. To further facilitate the spread of Christianity missionaries had to learn the language of the people, which also contributed to their success in translation work.⁴⁵

The Role of Local Evangelists

The work of African Evangelists and catechists became the most important source of converts from the mission stations. They were responsible for setting up village churches.⁴⁶

Other Bearings on the Church Growth Explosion in the 20th Century

In addition to the above factors that contributed to the growth of Christianity there were others which included the following:

The Colonisation of Africa

The most important historical factor was the colonization of Africa by European powers. If the goals of Christian missions were independent from the colonial agenda, why didn't Christian missionaries work in Africa in large numbers before the beginning of the colonial era? This is a good question. With the coming of colonial rule, a mutual relationship, or rather a partnership, developed between colonial rulers and Christian missions. Colonial rule provided a politically peaceful and supportive environment for the work of Christian missionaries. At the same time, colonial governments saw Christian missionaries as important allies. Colonial officials believed that Christianity would provide support for colonial rule. That is, they believed that Africans who converted to Christianity would not oppose European rule, but recognize its value. However, this was not always the case. Many of the early African nationalist leaders were educated Christians.⁴⁷

The symbiotic relationship between colonial governments and Christian missionaries was strongest in colonies that did not have large Muslim populations. In colonies that had large Moslem populations, colonial governments discouraged Christian mission work since they did not want to offend Moslem leaders and jeopardize their alliances with these leaders. The map of African Christianity above shows that there are few Christians in North Africa and in the predominately Moslem countries of West and North East Africa.

The rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa is in marked contrast to the expansion of Islam into the interior of West and East Africa. The adoption of Islam was a gradual process in each area, and in most cases it took centuries before entire commu-

⁴⁵A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 575-584.

⁴⁶See A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 1994; E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 1995.

⁴⁷Mgadla, 2003: 37 – 116.

nities became Moslem. Islam, unlike Christianity, did not have the benefit of the support of colonial governments, nor did they have large numbers of missionaries working in Africa.

Christian Missionaries

The second factor was an increase of Christian missionaries working throughout the African continent. It must therefore be pointed out that while European colonialism facilitated the work of Christian missionaries, these missionaries did not come to Africa because they were invited by colonial governments. The primary agenda of the missionaries was to spread Christianity through the conversion of many people by the proclamation of the gospel.

Schools and Hospitals

Schools and hospitals were another factor that contributed tremendously to the growth of Christianity in Africa. As pointed out above, the missionaries' priority was to enable people to read the Bible. Consequently, education and schooling became important additional goals of Christian missionaries. All over Africa, wherever missionaries went, they opened schools. At first, the main focus of these schools was to teach reading and religious instruction. Missionaries believed that the ability to read the Bible was of vital importance in the conversion process. This focus is not so different from the Moslem Quranic schools that focused on the learning of the Quran.

As the colonial era progressed, mission education expanded to include full primary and secondary schooling. While these schools were available to only a small minority of African children, they were important, since in most African countries the colonial governments were not willing to spend money on education for their subjects. In addition to their work in education, some mission societies were actively engaged in health work, opening hospitals and clinics in rural and sometimes remote areas.

In all of their activities—evangelism, education and health care—missionaries brought with them values and attitudes that reflected their understanding of Christianity and their view of African religions and cultures. Most missionaries found it hard to separate basic Christian values and teaching from their western culture. Consequently, many missionaries adopted beliefs that were widely-held among the western communities of that day. Many believed that European cultures and social structures and practices were superior to African cultural and social structures and practices. Indeed, many believed that African cultures were *primitive* and unchristian and that only through exposure to Christianity and Western culture would Africans be able to develop as individuals and as communities.

This perspective provided a lens through which many missionaries interpreted their experiences in Africa. Unfortunately, this lens provided a *distorted* and inaccurate understanding of African cultures, social practices and religions. However, as Christianity became established in Africa, African Christians, using their interpretation of the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, challenged distortions on the part of missionary understanding and practice.

Explosion of Christianity in Africa: Phase Two (2)

The western missionaries had planted the seeds of the church in Sub-Saharan Africa. As the Gospel spread throughout the continent, African Christianity began to define itself on its own cultural terms. Reformers within the missionary churches, as well as independent church leaders, demanded a transformation of Christianity. This has in recent years led to the development of the Charismatic movement within the missionary churches, African Independent churches and the Pentecostal churches.

The Growth of AICs

The usage of the abbreviation AICs is becoming popular because it can be applied in several ways. It stands for African Initiated Churches, African Independent Churches, African Instituted Churches or African Indigenous Churches. The phrases are used to refer to a group of churches, which have typically grown out of a Protestant mission context, often in frustration with the western missionaries. They have as a result walked away from the old structures and now function without reference to, or support from, overseas churches. They have self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting structures.⁴⁸ AICs are varied. On the one hand there are those with independent versions of western Protestant churches, and, on the other hand, those with highly syncretistic Christian versions of African traditional religions, using Christian language in reference to God, but with very little role for Jesus Christ.

The key factor is that these churches were founded by Africans and function within the African context. While some are indistinguishable from Mission churches, others are closer to African Traditional Religions, but using Christian language in their practice. Adrian Hastings observed that there are very few AICs of Catholic background and that most of them are Protestants. Catholics found breaking away from the mission churches extremely difficult because they put church unity and authority first. African Protestants found it easy to break away because church unity always took second place. Their Protestants roots put more stress on the authority of the Bible. AICs differ from the rest of the Protestant Churches because they read the Bible with an African cultural background rather than a western cultural background, which contributes to their taking some things in the Bible more literally than the missionaries.⁴⁹

From earliest times, many Africans embraced Christianity, but they did not always embrace the western missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa. This attitude started particularly in the early eighteenth century, with such people as Beatrice Kimpa Vita, the Congolese prophet, who established an African Christian movement that opposed some of the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic missionaries in the Congo. This movement was followed by other African Christians who decided to break away from missionary churches and form their own churches in the 19th century. This resulted in a wide variety of African Christian churches, which scholars

⁴⁸A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 293-298.

⁴⁹A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 493-539.

called African Independent Churches, since all of the churches established autonomy and independence from mission churches.

The 1950s saw the considerable spread of the mission churches across the continent and the development of a large body of churches wholly outside any mission connection. The independent churches were becoming a familiar part of the religious scene in many areas of Africa. They continued to grow, spread and proliferate, but with an emphasis on integrating Christianity into traditional African culture. Bengt Sundkler's pioneering study, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (1948), had been published just two years previously. At that time this type of Christianity had been largely ignored by writers, but in the past few years has received ever-increasing attention. This form of Christianity started to emerge in 1950 in some of the oldest Protestant missionary areas, such as in South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Botswana, Congo and Kenya.⁵⁰ The mission-founded churches under African leadership have also been working hard to copy their example and integrate the strengths of traditional African culture into their activities, to avoid loss of membership. AICs are strongest and most numerous in southern Africa and in Kenya and Nigeria.

While there are differences between African Independent Churches, there are important areas of unity and commonality: they are generally headed by strong *charismatic* leaders claiming a direct relationship with God. They put emphasis on direct communication with God through prayers, dreams and possession by the "Holy Spirit". Women have an active leadership role. They have greatly adapted Christianity to indigenous beliefs, values, and practice.

In the early years of the 21st century, African Independent Churches, particularly those of the Zionist persuasion, together with the Pentecostal churches, have been the fastest growing religious groups in Africa.⁵¹

Factors that Contributed to the Rise of the AICs

What were the factors that made it necessary to form churches that were independent from mission churches?

Racism: Some missionaries mistreated African Christians and accepted the popularly-held notion that Africans were not intellectually or culturally equal to Europeans. The educated African Christians felt insulted and frustrated, especially when they were denied leadership positions in the mission churches. They therefore left mission churches and formed their own independent churches.

Rejection of African Culture and Religious Beliefs/Practice: Generally missionaries forced African Christians to reject their cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Africans saw these as similar to practices in the Old and New Testaments of the

⁵⁰A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity...*, 67.

⁵¹E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, pp313-317; Hennie Pretorius & Izo Jafta, "A Branch Springs Out: African Initiated churches" in *Christianity in South Africa*, ed. Richard Elphick & Rodney Davenport, 1997:216-224

Bible. They therefore tried adapting Christianity to and incorporating aspects of African cultural practices consistent with Christianity.

The missionaries on the other hand considered them to be uncivilized and heathen.

Disagreements Between African Christians and Western missionaries over the Extent to which Traditional African Practices were Permissible: For instance, some AICs permit polygamy, following Old Testament cultural practices. On the other hand, very few mission churches tolerate polygamy. AICs have a vividly spiritualistic view of reality as a cosmic spiritual battleground populated by demons and witches, in which diseases have spiritual causes and cures, and prayer can persuade God to bring rain. This view is closer to the Biblical world. It led to clashes with the scientific western mission view which had little time for exorcism, faith healing or rainmaking through prayer. Elizabeth Isichei pointed out that these churches believed to have power over sickness and death, and of mastery over evil spirits. Unlike the mission churches, which interpreted disease in a rationalist-scientific way, and relied more on hospitals than prayer to solve health problems, they emphasized healing and miracles.⁵² John Masowe, the Shona prophet of the Wilderness, expressed this as follows:

When we were in these synagogues (established churches) we used to read about the works of Jesus Christ ... cripples were made to walk and the dead were brought to life ... evil spirits were driven out ... That was what was being done in Jerusalem. We Africans, however, who were being instructed by white people, never did anything like that ... We were taught to read the Bible, but we ourselves never did what the people of the Bible used to do.⁵³

There are two broad categories of AICs:

Ethiopian Independent Churches

Two of the earliest Ethiopian Independent Churches were formed in southern Nigeria by distinguished African leaders who felt that the mission churches discriminated against African leaders. In 1889, a Baptist minister, Vincent Mojola Agbebi, broke away from the mission Baptist Church to form an African Baptist Church. In 1891, Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African Anglican bishop, broke away from the Anglican (Episcopalian) church in Nigeria to form the African Anglican Pastorate. The frustration that resulted from the racist attitudes of the established mission churches led to new churches formed by African church leaders in West, East, Central, and Southern Africa.

The 20th century, therefore, experienced numerical growth of these new movements in different waves, each with its own general character. They first developed in both Nigeria and South Africa, where the earlier members of the group of churches were generically known as 'African' or 'Ethiopian'. As already mentioned earlier, the

⁵²E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 254.

⁵³E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 256.

movement here came from the existing Christian community and was led by either ordained or lay men of influence within the community.⁵⁴ Writing about their development Adrian Hastings writes:

It was a protest against white domination in the mission churches, the moral impossibility of the promotion of blacks above a certain level – indeed a certain tendency in West Africa to demote Africans as the white missionary force increased. Such churches retained nearly all the characteristics of the body from which they had seceded, while in some cases tolerating polygamy more openly than did missions – at least among the laity.⁵⁵

The word “Ethiopia” is used to demonstrate God’s long term interest and involvement in Africa. It is also associated with a state of independence. Ethiopian churches were founded by African Christians who felt frustrated by the racism in established mission churches that kept them from achieving positions of leadership. The leadership of the Ethiopian independent churches was exclusively African as opposed to that of mission churches which was exclusively missionary.⁵⁶

The “Ethiopian” churches which began in the last years of the 19th century were, therefore, the first steps of independence.⁵⁷ In terms of theology, basic teachings, liturgy, practice and worship, they were patterned after the western mission churches but were under African control in terms of leadership.

These second generation Christians were ready to step into leadership positions in the church just as a new generation of aggressively westernizing missionaries began flooding into Africa, and as European colonial powers scrambled for Africa. The new missionaries were determined to keep control of African Christianity in the same way as the colonial authorities intended to control the land.

The Ethiopian churches were fascinated by the notion of Ethiopia as a nation which had never been colonized. Anti-colonialism and African nationalism were very strong in the “Ethiopian” churches. For example, Ethiopianism was strong in South Africa where racism prevented African Christians from attaining any kind of leadership position in the mission churches.⁵⁸

⁵⁴A. Hastings, *A History of Christianity...*, 67-68.

⁵⁵A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 68.

⁵⁶A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 527-539; E. Isichei, *A history of Christianity...*, 3, 49, 124-339.

⁵⁷J. Bauer, *2000 years of Christianity...*, 125-358.

⁵⁸A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 478-486, 493-539; E. Isichei, *A history of Christianity...*, 24-127, 179-182, 215-216; L. Sanneh, *West African Christianity...*, 168-178; Hennie Pretorius & Izo Jafta, “A Branch Springs Out: African Initiated churches” in *Christianity in South Africa*, ed. Richard Elphick & Rodney Davenport, 1997:212-216

Aladura Churches, Zionist, Spiritual and Prophetic Churches

The rapid expansion of Christianity in 20th century Africa also resulted from the growth of the Zionist/Spiritual/Prophetic and the Aladura churches.

The Aladura Movement. In Yoruba, Aladura means “owners of prayer”.⁵⁹ The Aladura movement began in the early 1920s as prayer groups within established churches, initially in response to the world-wide influenza pandemic, a smallpox epidemic and the general crisis taking place in Nigeria at that time. The country suffered a severe famine, with many people dying on the streets. These praying people, who claim to pray more than the other Christians around them, visibly, and deliberately publicly, established networks of prayer in response to these challenges. The key belief in these Churches is that fervent prayer attains specific goals, particularly with regard to health. Faith in prayer leads the followers to reject all medicines, both traditional charms and western medical care in favour of faith healing and the power of prayer to heal different kinds of diseases. Along with prayer, they practise fasting, and believe that some blessings can be effected through fasting and prayer, when God can speak to the faithful in dreams and visions. They believe that witchcraft is real and that witches possess real Satanic and demonic spiritual powers, which can only be cast out by the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ name. Power and victory over these demonic and evil forces sum up the key elements of Aladura Christianity. Though they have rejected traditional African religions, as well as any form of modernization and westernization, their underlying operations and premises are African.⁶⁰

Examples of the Aladura Churches, all of which developed in Nigeria are as follows:

The Precious Stone Society started as an Anglican prayer group. Two years later the members left the Anglican Church because they viewed infant baptism as practised by the church as unbiblical. They also rejected all forms of medicine, whether western or traditional, viewing them as a sign of compromise and lack of faith in the Word of God. The society placed a heavy emphasis on Bible study, family life, development of education and schools and described itself as Pentecostal rather than Aladura. The branches of the church became Pentecostal in practice, doctrine and belief and practised faith healing. The early converts became successful businessmen and influential politicians, who anonymously funded Christian activities and projects in the country.

The Cherubim and Seraphim Society also founded a prayer movement within the Anglican Church in 1925 and broke away by 1928.⁶¹ It was characterized by trances, dreams and intense prayer meetings, as well as by long evangelistic crusades in the

⁵⁹E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 279.

⁶⁰A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 513-518, 526; E. Isichei, *A history of Christianity...*, pp.279-284; L. Sanneh, *West African Christianity...*, 184-205.

⁶¹A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity...*, 67.

countryside,⁶² and by divisions and splits.⁶³ It is also known by its peculiar and distinctive white robes, modelled after Roman Catholic priestly vestments, but worn by all the adherents.

The Church of the Lord grew from the revivalist preaching of Joseph Ositelu, which swept Yorubaland in the 1930s. His ministry was characterised by visions, mass conversions and the burning of traditional religious images and charms in the possession of the new converts. He was dismissed from being an Anglican teacher and catechist by the CMS mission. He claimed to be haunted by witches, which he overcame by prayer and fasting. He taught against eating religiously unclean things such as pork. He also kept and observed occultic Holy Names and Seals. Prophecy and prophetic revelations that dominated the church came to supplement and even supplant the teachings of the Bible, and received equal authority with the Bible. The church believed that dreams and visions brought new and esoteric knowledge of holy things.

The Celestial Church of Christ was founded in 1947 by a carpenter named Papa Samuel Oschoffa. Oschoffa's winsome personality made it the most popular, most attractive and most influential of the Aladura churches today.

Zionist, Spiritual and Prophetic Churches

Zionist independent churches are also known as Spirit, Prophetic or Healing churches because of their emphasis on spiritual and physical healing through the intervention of the "Holy Spirit". Zionist prophets, as their leaders are regarded, are understood to perform the same functions as those of priests and healers in African indigenous religions. Zionist worship is characterized by singing and dancing accompanied by drums and other African musical instruments, as well as by some kind of spirit possession, and healing of illnesses. Zionist churches have had to bring together elements of Christian and indigenous African religious belief and practice. Christian Zionism is, therefore, the adaptation of Christianity to African cultural values, beliefs, and practices.⁶⁴ Zionist Christians can be distinguished from the followers of the Ethiopian churches by their distinctive style of dress. They wear long and colourful gowns. Most garments will have such symbols as a dove, star, or cross. Zionists generally follow the Old Testament Jewish tradition.

Zionism is a Southern African form of Protestant Christianity but very much in tune with and parallel to African ways of thinking. It blended itself into the traditional African culture within a generation and is entirely under African leadership, with no connection to its mission churches of origin. Its key practices are faith healing, river-immersion baptism and spirit baptism.

⁶²A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity*..., 67.

⁶³By 1960 about 52 branches had been founded, of which 49 re-united into a single federation of Seraphim churches.

⁶⁴B. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 304-305.

The Zionist churches started in Southern Africa when the first was founded by P.L. Le Roux, an Afrikaner committed to faith healing. He left the Dutch Reformed Church in 1903 to join the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church, founded in the USA by John Alexander Dowie. Le Roux had a close and happy relationship with Africans, and easily conveyed the tenets of Zionism to the African Church he served. They called themselves the Zionist Apostolic Church. A few years later, Le Roux moved on from Zionism to Pentecostalism, carrying his flock with him from faith-healing to speaking in tongues, but retaining the name. It developed an African leadership very early. In 1908, Daniel Nkonyane replaced Le Roux as the principal leader of the church when Le Roux joined the newly formed Pentecostal church, the Apostolic Faith Mission.⁶⁵

By the 1920s the Zionist churches began to share the look of prophetic churches, donning distinctive white robes, carrying prophetic staffs and observing the same kind of food taboos as the prophetic churches did.

In the 1930s emerged Isaiah Shembe, a Zulu healer, a hymn-writer of genius, and founder of the church of AmaNazaretha.⁶⁶

In 1924, Engenas Lekganyane founded the Zion Christian Church, which has become one of the fastest growing Zionist churches in Southern Africa. In Botswana, its membership is estimated at 25, 000.⁶⁷

The Harris Wade Churches were formed by William Wade Harris, a Liberian prophet of the Ivory Coast. He was brought up as a Methodist, but later worked for the Protestant Episcopal Church as a teacher. He fought the Liberian rule by Americans and was implicated in a rebellion and later imprisoned. In prison he claimed that Archangel Gabriel had anointed, appointed and sent him out as prophet to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. He abandoned European clothes as a sign of conversion, simplicity and the humility of the gospel message. He walked barefoot, wore a long white robe with black bands across the chest, carrying a tall cross made of cane, a calabash to fill with water for baptism, a gourd rattle, and a Bible. He was accompanied by three women, who sang, danced and played the rattle to accompany his preaching. His preaching journeys, which lasted until 1915, were extraordinary, and the most effective evangelistic crusades in modern African history.⁶⁸ They were probably the most remarkable single evangelical campaigns Africa had ever witnessed at that time.

In his preaching, Harris had claimed that God had come to vanquish and replace the spirits of tradition. He emphasized the imminent return of Christ, which people had to prepare for by a radical conversion of life, and by obeying the Ten Commandments, observing Sunday. He gave elementary instruction in the Christian faith in simplicity and love, accepting the authority of the Bible, and burning the traditional religious articles, which were believed to keep evil away. He however did not condemn polygamy.

⁶⁵A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 499-504.

⁶⁶A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 499-505, 520-521, 537-538.

⁶⁷J. N. Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1994), 307.

⁶⁸A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 305-508.

Harris instructed his new converts to enter the existing missionary Christian churches. Where there were no mission churches to send converts to, he appointed twelve apostles to provide leadership and strictly follow his teachings and practices. He returned to die in Liberia, his home country, in 1929.⁶⁹ The Apostles appointed by Harris took the Harris churches to Ivory Coast in 1915. They built chapels, and composed hymns. Although Harris had asked his followers to join missionary churches, intransigence over the issue of polygamy forced the Methodists not to welcome some of the Harrists.⁷⁰

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Prophet Simon Kimbangu was founded by Simon Kimbangu in 1921. Kimbangu was a Congolese, inspired by a Baptist missionary, G. P. Cameroon. He began to have visions of God calling him to be a healer and an apostle after 1918, the year of the great worldwide influenza pandemic.⁷¹

Kimbangu's faith-healing ministry drew great crowds and alarmed the Belgian authorities, who feared that he might become a focus for nationalistic rebellion. In 1921 he, together with some of his followers, escaped arrest, but decided to surrender to the authorities three months later. He was tried, and sentenced to 120 lashes and death. Protestant missionaries protested at this travesty of justice, since Kimbangu neither participated in nor advocated any rebellion against the colonial powers, but had consistently preached obedience to authority. He was abused, sentenced unfairly and imprisoned for thirty years until he died in prison in 1951.⁷²

Simon Kimbangu was entirely orthodox in his theology and practice. He advocated monogamy, attacked traditional religion and demanded the burning of fetishes by his followers. Converts were to refrain from traditional dancing, ceremonies and the consumption of alcohol.⁷³

Whilst the Kimbanguist church is not very sacramental, its calendar is dominated by three main dates: April 6th, the date the ministry of healing began, October 12th, the day Kimbangu died in prison, and Christmas Day, the birthday of Christ. These are the only three days during which the Lord's Supper has been celebrated since 1966. The service opens with a procession into the sanctuary and the waving of palm branches, followed by singing and dancing.

The Belgian authorities clamped down on the Kimbanguists, subjecting them to floggings, sacking their place of worship and exiling the faithful to various provinces of the Belgian Congo. The persecution continued into the late 1950s. In 1957, 600 leading Kimbanguists signed a letter that ran: "Wherever we meet for prayer, we are arrested by your soldiers. In order not to burden the police with added work, we shall all gather, unarmed, in the Stadium, where you can arrest us all at once, or massacre us."

⁶⁹A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity*..., 67.

⁷⁰E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity*..., 284-286; A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa*..., 305-308; A. Hastings, *A history of African Christianity*..., 67; L. Sanneh, *West African Christianity*..., 123-125.

⁷¹A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa*..., 305-513.

⁷²A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa*..., 508-513.

⁷³L. Sanneh, *West African Christianity*..., 206-207.

The government officially recognized them in 1959 and they stopped being an underground movement. Kimbangu's youngest son, Joseph Diangienda, led the new church into the era of independence, joining the World Council of Churches in 1970. The modern church discourages ecstatic trembling and spiritual healing and regards Kimbangu as an African saviour.⁷⁴

John Chilembwe, an American-trained missionary, returned to his native Nyasaland (now Malawi) and founded the Province of Industrial Mission. He believed in a new African society, based on Christian values but independent of Europeans. He attacked tax and recruitment, and led an armed insurrection against the British. As a result of his execution in 1915, he became a symbol of defiant liberation from the political and religious colonial systems.

In Nigeria, Garrick Braide called himself Elijah II and claimed the British were about to leave Nigeria because of the war. His prophesies contributed to a revolt in Kwale Ibo.⁷⁵ In the same spirit was the rise of a South African theology of liberation, usually known as Contextual Theology. Contextual theology emphasises the Biblical themes of justice, and a deliberate struggle for the improvement of the status of the poor and the oppressed. It is by and large a theology developed and preached within Black and Coloured churches. Contextual theology was particularly powerful before the breakup of Apartheid in 1994, though it has by no means gone away in the years since 1994. This theology introduced the issue of religion and politics in the history of Christianity in Africa.

Pentecostalism in Africa

Pentecostalism has become an increasingly prominent feature of Africa's religious landscape. Its growth became prominent and particularly dramatic when most parts of Africa became independent in the 1960s. Recent figures show that Pentecostals now represent 12% (about 107 million), of Africa's population of nearly 890 million people. This development includes the classical Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God and the Apostolic Faith Mission, that were founded in the early 20th century in Southern Africa. It also encompasses those Pentecostal churches more recently established such as the Deeper Life Bible Church, which was founded in Nigeria and quickly spread to other parts of Africa. In addition to the above, there are also the Charismatic Christians, who are drawn mainly from Catholic, Protestant and African Independent Churches. They have another 40 million members, approximately 5% of the population of Africa.⁷⁶ *The World Christian Encyclopedia and World Christian Database* (2006) have presented the following figures:

⁷⁴A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa...*, 508-513; E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity...*, 199-201; L. Sanneh, *West African Christianity...*, 206-209.

⁷⁵A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity...*, 67.

⁷⁶World Christian Database cited in <http://pewforum.org/surveys/pentecostal/africa/>

PENTECOSTALS & CHARISMATICS IN AFRICA				
	1900	1970	1990	2005
Pentecostals & Charismatics (in millions)	0.9	17.0	93.7	146.9
Pentecostals & Charismatics as % of total population	0.8	4.8	15.2	16.6

Source: World Christian Encyclopedia (2001) & World Christian Database (2006)⁷⁷

The above discussion suggests that Pentecostals are not the only Christian group in Africa to have experienced significant growth in recent decades. According to the World Christian Database, Christianity as a whole increased from about 10 million adherents in 1900 to about 144 million by 1970. Today the continent's Christians are estimated at around 400 million (46% of the population). Catholics grew from 13% of Africa's population in 1970 to 17% in 2005. Protestants, including Anglicans and independents, constituted about 15% of Africa's population in 1970 but nearly doubled, to 29%, by 2005. As the following figures show this is significant growth, as the following figures show:

CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA								
	1900		1970		1990		2005	
	In millions	% of total population	In millions	% of total population	In millions	% of total population	In millions	% of total population
*1	10	9	144	40	276	45	411	46
*2	2	2	45	13	91	15	147	17
*3	2	2	53	15	162	26	253	29

*1 Christians

*2 Catholics

*3 Protestants, Anglicans & Independents

Source: World Christian Encyclopedia (2001) & World Christian Database (2006)

Even by African standards, the Pentecostal growth rate stands out, and many countries reflect this trend. In South Africa, for example, the Pentecostal Apostolic Faith Mission is as numerically strong as the Dutch Reformed Church, the traditional stronghold of the country's Protestantism. In Zimbabwe, the Assemblies of God has almost as many adherents as the Catholic Church. In Ghana, the largest Christian church is the Church of Pentecost. In Kenya, in the early 1990s the Assemblies of God was the fastest growing denomination.⁷⁸ In Nigeria, the most populous African country,

⁷⁷Cited in <http://pewforum.org/surveys/pentecostal/africa/>

⁷⁸<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:JyaazSnai3sJ:pewforum.org/surveys/pentecostal/africa/+murphy,+Pentecostals+in+Nigeria,+2006&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk:>
Accessed on the 28th April 2010

Pentecostals now equal the combined numerical strength of its long-dominant Catholic and Anglican churches.⁷⁹

The dramatic expansion of Pentecostalism has affected almost every part of sub-Saharan Africa, though its impact varies from region to region. Most affected are Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ghana, Congo-Zaire, Nigeria, Kenya, Angola, Zambia and Uganda, where Pentecostals and Charismatics represent more than 20% of the national populations. The least affected countries are Ivory Coast, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Madagascar and Sudan, where Pentecostals and Charismatics make up less than 10% of the population. Countries where the Pentecostal and Charismatic population is between 10% and 20% include Congo-Brazzaville, the Central African Republic, Malawi, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia and Mozambique.⁸⁰

Thorns in the Flesh of the African Church

Persecution and Violence

The amazing growth of Christianity in the 20th century was followed by persecution. The oppressive African Governments that emerged in the 20th century somehow saw Christianity as a threat. They therefore responded with oppressive measures in order to silence the church. For instance, in the 20th century alone, there have been some 1.8 million Christian martyrs in Africa. This figure does not take into account the estimated 600,000 Christians who died in the genocidal conflicts in Rwanda and Burundi.⁸¹ It also does not fully account for the more than two million deaths in the 17 years (since 1990) of the Sudanese civil war waged by the militant Islamist government on the predominantly Christian population of the south. Since the beginning of 2006, dozens of churches have been destroyed and an unknown number of Christians killed by the violent attacks of fundamental Moslems in Nigeria.⁸²

Persecution in Africa took place in the following places: northern Africa: Algeria and Libya (in the 1980s and 1990s); Central Africa and the Great Lakes region: in Burundi (1989-90), Cameroon, Ethiopia and Eritrea (1980s), Gabon (1977), Equatorial Guinea (1983), Somalia (1960-64), Zaire (1960-64); West Africa: Liberia (1989), Nigeria (1995), Sierra Leone (1995); Central Africa:; in East Africa: Rwanda (1994), Uganda (1972-1995), Kenya (during persecution by the Mau Mau secret society and more subtly in successive years), Madagascar (1980s), Mozambique (1985); Southern Af-

⁷⁹See <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:JyaazSnai3sJ:pewforum.org/surveys/pentecostal/africa/+murphy,+Pentecostals+in+Nigeria,+2006&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk>: Accessed on the 28th April, 2010.

⁸⁰<http://pewforum.org/surveys/pentecostal/africa/>

⁸¹<http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/globalchristianity/mmrc/mmrc9630.htm>; <http://www.efcer.org/missions/countries/rwanda.html>; <http://chi.gospelcom.net/GLIMPSEF/Glimpses/glimps151.shtml>: Accessed in August 2010.

⁸²<http://www.persecution.org/suffering/index.php>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki/Persecution_of_Christians <http://www.bibleleague.org/persecuted/africapapers.php>

rica: South Africa (1985), Lesotho (1980s), Angola (1982-84), Zimbabwe (1977-79) and above all in Sudan in the north, with brutal Islamic persecution which has lasted now for more than thirty years since 1956 up to the present day in different ways and forms. In Tanzania, a group of missionaries was killed in Majimai.⁸³ All these persecution has affected Christian progress and gains in Africa. Wars, and the persecution of innocent women and children, continue to haunt the Church in Africa today.

Poverty, Corruption, Gender, HIV/AIDS, etc.

Poverty, corruption, gender and HIV/AIDS are some of the important issues facing the church in Africa. Unless and until these are resolved or settled, it cannot be said that African Christianity is flourishing or that it has reached maturity. As the continent remains sick and under the attack of these issues, it is inappropriate for us as Africans to celebrate the gains that we have made in the last 2000 years. The church must be seen to have a plan or programme that aims at eradicating poverty and achieving universal primary education, that promotes gender equality, reduces child mortality, improves maternal health, fights killer diseases such as HIV and AIDS, protects the environment, and partners globally for economic development. This sounds impossible for the church, but the church must be seen to be making efforts in these directions. Jesus challenged the church to respond to the needs of the community when he said: "For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me".⁸⁴

The Formation of the Ecumenical Movements

Finally, we need to mention something about ecumenism in Africa. As early as 1810, William Carey of the Baptist Missionary Society made a proposal that there be a meeting of all denominations of Christians at the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. This meeting never took place, because Fuller, Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, did not support the idea. Carey's ambition was, however, achieved in "Edinburgh 1910", the greatest landmark in the history of the ecumenical movement in modern history.⁸⁵ This World Missionary Conference was attended by Africans and missionaries working in Africa. The conference struggled with taking a position on African social structures such as marriage, circumcision etc. Adrian Hastings quotes the report of the Commission of the World Missionary Conference which discussed this as follows:

Our correspondents in Africa view with unanimous intolerance conditions of life which are not only unchristian, but are at variance with instinctive feelings of natural morality

⁸³See note 73 & 74.

⁸⁴Matthew 25:42-43 – the Parable of the Sheep and Goats

⁸⁵J. N. Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999), 153-155.

with them there can be no “question” of polygamy. It is simply one of the gross evils of heathen society which, like habitual murder or slavery, must at all costs be ended ... In Africa polygamy is more prevalent than in other countries ... indeed, the Christian law upon this subject may be said to be the greatest obstacle to the acceptance of our faith. In the face of this it is surprising to note, that it is in regard to the evidence from Africa alone that there is an almost complete unanimity of opinion. Every mission within our review refused admission to the church in Africa to any man who is actually living with more than one wife.⁸⁶

Before the Edinburgh 1910 conference there were other attempts by the church in Africa to seek church unity. There was the Nyasaland United Missionary Conference held in Malawi in 1900 and 1904, and the Conference of Federated Missions of Nyasaland in 1910. In 1902, the Christian churches in Congo formed the Congo General Conference of Protestant Missions, which held a conference in 1906.⁸⁷ In 1904, the first General Missionary Conference was held in South Africa, with 104 delegates representing 25 missionary societies. Other conferences of this body were held in 1906 and 1909. In 1908, the churches in Kenya came up with the idea of the translation of hymn and scripture as a united church of Africa. A conference held by the General Missionary Conference body came up with a proposal for a single African church which would be self-governing and self-propagating within British East Africa.⁸⁸ All these efforts contributed towards the unity of the church in Africa and the ecumenical spirit attributed to the 1910 Edinburgh World Conference. When the World Council of Churches was founded in 1948, the African church fully participated in its different structures. Other important ecumenical organizations that developed in Africa were the All Africa Conference of Churches; Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar; Organisation of African Independent Churches and the Fellowship of Councils of Churches in Eastern and Southern Africa.⁸⁹

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that African Christianity has been through many challenges and has experienced great transformation. Its character, size and impact are very different now from what they were a hundred years ago. Although it faced difficult situations in the past, such as colonisation, racism, and splits, its present and future situations have even more difficult challenges. Secularism, globalisation, modernity, consumerism, technology and other advances of the twenty first century are making

⁸⁶The Church in the Mission Field, report of Commission II of the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, 5-6; 69-70 in Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 317.

⁸⁷Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement...*, 153-155.

⁸⁸Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement...*, 156.

⁸⁹Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement...*, 253-288.

their demand on all forms of African Christianity. What is the response of Christianity to these factors? Will African Christianity survive their impact? In the face of all these influences, can we say that Christianity will continue to rapidly expand? Isn't African Christianity likely to reach the state Western Christianity has reached today? What are the positive and negative indicators for or against such a development in African Christianity?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Africa's Muslims: Expressing their Religious Identity

Muhammed Haron

Introduction

Africa is a vibrant religious continent that is in Mbiti's¹ words 'notoriously religious'. For many generations, the African Continent has been and remains the home of diverse linguistic communities, rich cultures and a variety of minor and major religions. Three major religions have been dominant for many centuries: African Religious Traditions (ATR), Christianity and Islam. Although Christianity and Islam are sometimes considered foreign, both have been around for a long time. And during the past few decades they have been joined by Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and the Bahai Faith.

It is important to note that ATR, Christianity and Islam have shared long socio-historical relationships and developed alongside one another over many centuries. Perhaps a detailed comparative study by some scholars on how they came to be deeply rooted into the African soil can form interesting reading. Another aspect beyond the scope of this Chapter is the beliefs and practices of Islam. Detailed insights into the practice of Islam as a religion have been dealt with in many other published works including scholarly essays².

This Chapter discusses how 'African Islam' has developed historically and expressed itself throughout the 20th century. It covers four interconnected issues: first, it sketches the socio-historical development of Muslims during the late 19th century so as to help us understand the developments in the 20th century. Second, it provides an overview of their demographics. Third, it discusses the state of Muslims in Africa with special focus on those to be found to the South of the Sahara. Fourth, it looks at the

¹J. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann: 1969: 1. The Pew Forum Sub-Saharan 2010 Survey also confirmed that Africa's communities are generally devout and morally conservative.

²Andrew Rippen & Jan Knappert (ed & tr.) *Textual Sources for the Study of Islam* Manchester: Manchester University Press 1986; Mahmoud M. Ayoub *Islam: Faith and Practice* London and Pretoria: The Open Press Ltd; Annemarie Schimmel *Islam: An Introduction* New York: SUNY 1992, and Vincent Cornell (ed.) *Voices of Islam*. Praeger. 5 volumes, 2007.

issues that have challenged the very identity and expression of Muslims and their religion in Africa.

*Identity and Agency*³

Identity and *agency* are significant conceptual tools in understanding 'African Islam.' Social scientists view social *identity* as an element that binds individuals together to form a group (e.g. ethnic communities and religious organizations) and relate to one another through familial relations and cultural connections.

These scholars define *agency* as 'the capacity of an agent to act in a world.' An agent is basically an individual who has the ability to make certain rational choices and live with the consequences; individuals may, for example, to switch national (from being Nigerian to being American) or religious (from being Christian to being Muslim) identities. Sometimes, the choices may be seen by some as problematic and by others as moral or immoral.

A human agent possesses free will that he or she exercises in most – if not all – circumstances. Unlike other creatures, such an agent has the capacity to impose his or her choice on others within his or her jurisdiction. The question as to *how* human beings make decisions is significant in philosophical circles. Karl Marx, Socrates and other social philosophers argued about the thought process. However, this process is not important when considering the outcomes of human agency.

Human agency was regarded by rich philosophical traditions as a dynamic, collective function that emerged as a result of individual actions or behaviour. These traditions flourished in Europe in general, Muslim heartlands and in countries like Greece, China and India.

The North African tradition represented by Ibn Khaldun's understanding of society and the European tradition represented by Hegel's 'spirit' and Marx's 'universal class' stressed that human beings are essentially social beings⁴. They organise them-

³cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agency_%28philosophy%29; <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/p/identity> and <http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/adoption/education/intercountry/module6/definition-ethnicity.html> (accessed 20 May 2010). And see Nadia Tazia's edited text: *Keywords: Identity: For a Different Kind of Globalization* Cape Town: Double Storey, 2004.

⁴A. Ahmed. 'Ibn-Khaldun's Understanding of Civilizations and the Dilemmas of Islam and the West Today.' In *Middle East Journal* 56(1): 1-26, Winter, 2002; Ibn-Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (ed. N. J. Dawood,) Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1967; Padover, S. K. *Karl Marx: An Intimate Biography*. New York: Mentor 1990; M.K. Pasha. 'Ibn-Khaldun and World Order.' In *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies* (eds. S. Gill and J. H. Mittelman). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1997; and N. Schmidt. *Ibn-Khaldun: Historian, Sociologist and Philosopher*. New York: AMS Press 1967.

selves to act in concert with one another and take charge of their lives.⁵ Human agency is therefore the ability of individuals to associate with particular groups or organizations to achieve specific goals or to learn the difference between right and wrong, and eventually arrive at ethical and moral decisions.

Figure 18.1: Agencies⁶

Mazrui's Model: Agencies of Islamic Expansion in Africa



Source: Haran's diagram based on Mazrui's ideas.

In view of the above discourse, African Muslims have collectively functioned as agents who made choices and decisions that resulted in the presence and expansion of Islam on the African continent. Their collective actions helped to carve out a special niche for Islam and assisted to shape a particular image of the 'African Muslims.' Thus, the identity of 'African Muslims' is absolutely distinct from the identity expressed by the Arab, Indian, Chinese, European or Malay Muslims. It is also true that even in Africa, the expression of Islam and the identity of Muslims by different ethnic groups or regions

⁵B. Barnes, 'Choice and Agency in Social Theory' and 'Agency and Responsibility in Sociological Theory' in *Understanding Agency: Social Theory and Responsible Action*. London & New York: Sage Publications. Ch. 2, 17-33 and 82-102, 2000.

⁶Ali Mazrui. 'Seek ye first the Mythical Kingdom.' In *General History of Africa VIII: Africa since 1935*. (ed. A. Mazrui & C. Wondji). California: Heinemann & UNESCO. Vol. 8 Ch. 5 pp. 105-125, 1993 and Ali Mazrui. Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa. In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (ed. John Esposito). New York: OUP. 2: 261-271, 1995.

differs markedly. For example, there are tangible differences between the Islamic faith expressed in Southern Africa and that of West Africa⁷.

These differences result from the agencies or modes via which Islam found its way to Africa. Figure 1 shows five modes or agencies as observed by Ali Mazrui: conquest, migration and settlement, trade, mission and petro-wealth. All these factors contributed towards the numerical growth of Muslims and expansion of Islam in Africa. North Africa's population is largely Muslim. However, the percentage of Muslims in Southern Africa is relatively small.

Beliefs and Practices of Muslims

Belief and practices are the basis on which African Islam has been fashioned. Anyone who wishes to understand African Islam must comprehend these two because they help to clarify and explain how the Muslim mind operates within an African and any other context. Beliefs and practices to a large extent determine the expression of Islam by Muslims all over the world. That is why Indian, Arab, African, European or Latin American Muslims are dissimilar. Modern scholars who refer to the religion as 'Islams' not 'Islam' must have been conscious of these differences.

Beliefs

Islam is considered by Muslims as a 'way of life,' not a religion. This way of life is anchored in the belief that there is no other god except Allah (The [only true] God). The beliefs and practices are rooted in the concept of *tawhid* – one that captures the essence of God's unity. The first principle in the Muslims belief system is that 'God is One'. The belief is followed by expressing faith in the existence of His angels. This they do by unreservedly accepting all the divinely revealed scriptures. They also publicly acknowledge the many spiritually inspired messengers (of God). Besides, they unconditionally admit the reality of the Hereafter after one's physical death on earth.

Practices

These beliefs discussed above are further given life through established practices – that were carried out and demonstrated by Muhammad who Muslim firmly accept to be God's final messenger. A Muslim has to declare the following creed: 'I bear witness that there is no other god but Allah (God) and that Muhammad is His final messenger.'

Apart from publicly making this declaration, a Muslim is expected to do the following:

- Perform the ritual prayer (salat) five times a day
- Give the purificatory tax (zakat) annually

⁷Peter B. Clarke *West Africa and Islam* London: Edward Arnold. 1982; J. Spencer Trimingham *The Influence of Islam upon Africa* London: Longman 1980; Abdul-Kader Tayob 'The Past and Present of African Islam.' *Religion Compass* 2(3): 261-272, May 2008, and Muhammed Haron 'Emerging and Challenging Voices in the House of Islam: South Africa's African Muslims.' *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 26(3): 57-87, Summer 2009.

- Fast (sawm) during the month of fasting and,
- Perform the pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca and surrounding areas at least once during one's life (if the person has the means).

These beliefs and practices have been elaborated upon by others and will not be further expanded upon in this Chapter. It should, however, be emphasised that Muslims view the Quran, which they regard as God's final revealed text, as God's word and *not* that uttered or expressed by Muhammad.

They also believe that Muhammad was only a recipient – tasked to disseminate it to his companions and to later generations orally (and later in written form). Furthermore, since Muhammad remains the exemplar and model of Muslims, they are expected to live, implement and follow in his footsteps. All Muslims be they men or women should emulate and imitate the life of Muhammad as best as they can in their specific circumstances. This should be evident in their day to day lives.

Sources of Islam Teachings

Muhammad's companions subsequently compiled texts (Hadith) that contain Muhammad's statements and practices. *Hadith* act as a second primary source of God's teachings – commonly known as 'sunnah.' Thus, the Quran and the Sunnah form the primary sources of Islamic teachings. These two writings are complemented by secondary sources: the 'consensus' (ijma) and the culture of the local communities. The *ijma* was arrived at by jurists, theologians and learned scholars.

No doubt, these sources have influenced and impacted upon the emerging Muslim communities in different parts of the world in general and Africa specifically.

Because of the inspiration and stimulation of these sources, African Muslims have carved out an interesting African Muslim identity. For example, there are remarkable differences between North African Muslims and Arab Muslims as earlier stated. The same can be said of Asian Muslims.

Demographics of African Muslims

The demographic spread of Muslims on the African continent is varied. Whereas the population is dense in some areas, others have very few numbers. At the outset it should be made quite clear that the census used is not very accurate. Consequently, the available figures from different institutions and researchers are not fixed and precise.⁸ Nevertheless, the statistics at least give an indication of Muslim societies across the continent and offer some insight into the demographics.

⁸Compare this brief study, which was completed by the end of 2007, with Ahmadu Jacky Kaba's 'The Numerical Dimensions in Africa' *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 26(3): 1-23, Summer 2009. Also consult Houssain Kettani's 'Muslims in Africa' in *Proceedings of the 2009 International Conference on Social and Humanities*. Singapore, October 2009.

Table 18.1: Regional Spread of African Muslims⁹

Region	Total Population	Muslims(in millions)	% Muslim	% of total Muslim population
Central Africa	97,665,660	15.3	15.67	3.46
East Africa	283,765,021	81,9	28.86	18.53
North Africa	202,151,323	180,0	89.04	40.74
Southern Africa	54,055,000	0,89	1.65	0.2
West Africa	298,632,255	163,7	54.81	37.05
Total	936,269,259¹⁰	441,79	47.18	100.00

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Africa (accessed 20 May 2010)

Table 18.1 shows the Muslim population according to regions. Countries have been grouped into five regions. The total population in each region provides a useful picture of the number of Muslims inhabitants. It should be noted that the division of the regions has not been done in any scientific way and as a result of this scholars seem to decide for themselves which states should be included and which should be excluded from a region; this is clearly the case when we compare Kaba’s text to Kettani’s text (also see footnote 8 below). In addition, we also note that though the figures are quite useful, they also do not seem to correspond with the other. What this essentially alludes to is the problems that statisticians face when having to deal with country-by-country census.

Table 18.2 below demonstrates the population breakdown by country during 2008. As earlier stated, these figures and percentages – though not precise - provide a general picture of the Muslim’s spread on the continent, and it will indeed be informative to compare these with earlier statistics to gauge the trends in growth and development among Africa’s Muslims.

⁹It will be observed that Kaba sourced his data from a different source, namely the *CIA Factbook* and this text, in turn, also categorised the regions differently; in other words, some states that one expected to form part of Southern Africa (namely, Zimbabwe and Mozambique) have been clustered with those in East Africa. The same may be said for Kettani’s paper. Despite the problems with nomenclature as to what is understood by ‘Eastern Africa’ and ‘Southern Africa’ respectively. Nevertheless, the important point to consider is the variations in the statistics. Table 18.2 in this Chapter adopted a similar classification scheme.

¹⁰When we compare this figure to those in Table 18.3 as well as Kettani’s (2009), the discrepancies are obvious. Notwithstanding these, we opted to use the statistics that have been made available by the Wikipedia site to illustrate the numerical strength and weaknesses of Africa’s Muslims.

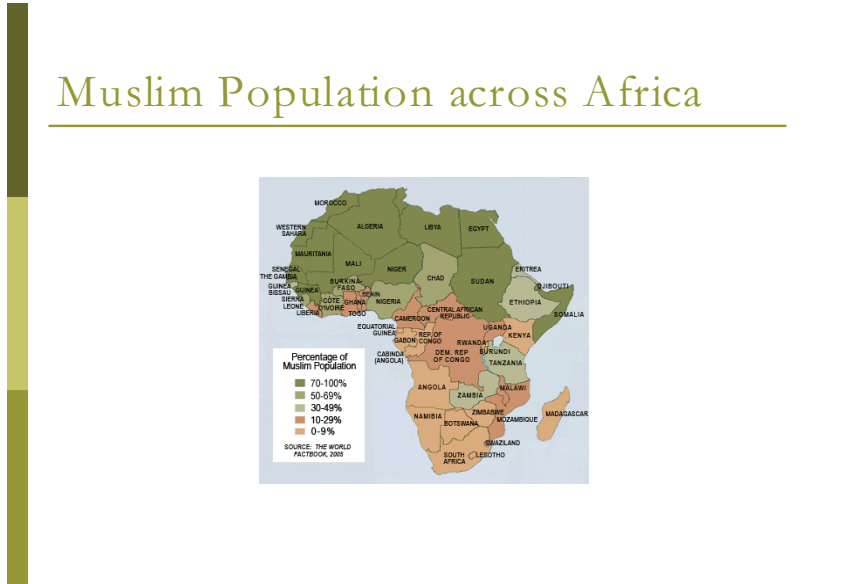
Table 18.2: Statistics of African Muslims by country

Country	Total Population in 2008 (in millions)	Muslim Percentage	Muslim Population in 2008
Northern Africa			
Algeria	34.7	99	33.17
Egypt	74.9	94	70.88
Libya	6.3	99	5.72
Morocco	31.7	99	31.38
Sudan	39.4	70	30.08
Tunisia	10.3	98	9.90
Western Africa			
Benin	9.3	24.4	1.74
Burkina Faso	15.2	50	6.80
Cape Verde	0.50	5	0.01
Ivory Coast	20.7	38.6	11.82
Gambia	1.6	90	1.43
Ghana	23.9	30	6.78
Guinea	10.3	85	8.33
Guinea Bissau	1.7	50	0.85
Liberia	3.9	20	0.68
Mali	12.7	90	12.51
Mauritania	3.2	100	3.2
Niger	14.7	95	13.97
Nigeria	148.1	50	65.25
Senegal	12.7	94	11.19
Sierra Leone	5.5	60	3.42
Togo	6.8	25	1.58
Eastern Africa			
Burundi	8.9	10	0.78
Comoros	0.7	98	0.69
Djibouti	0.8	96	0.75
Eritrea	5.0	50	2.30
Ethiopia	79.1	50	37.40
Kenya	38.0	33	8.33
Madagascar	18.9	7	1.25
Malawi	13.6	36	2.56
Mayotti	0.2	97.85	0.20
Mauritius	1.3	16.6	0.22
Mozambique	20.4	20	3.98
Reunion	0.8	2	0.02
Rwanda	9.6	15	0.42
Seychelles	0.10	1.1	
Somalia	9.0	100	8.9
Tanzania	40.2	50	18.95
Uganda	29.2	20	4.43
Zambia	12.2	15	1.79
Zimbabwe	13.1	10	0.13
Middle Africa			
Angola	16.8	2.5	0.42
Cameroon	18.5	22	3.59

Source: http://www.islamicpopulation.com/africa/africa_general.html¹¹

¹¹For Equatorial Guinea there seems to be no clear data according http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Equatorial_Guinea; Seychelles, however, consists of about 900 individuals according to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Seychelles (accessed 20 May 2010).

Figure 18.2: Map of Muslims in Africa



Source: www.usip.org

David Barrett et al, co-editors of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* also provide statistics on Muslim over a thirty year period. These statistics as shown in Table 18.3; it shows a steady growth of the Muslim population in Africa between 1970 and 2000; and if we take into account the most recent calculations in 2010 then, we assume, they will be more revealing.

Table 18.3: Growth of Muslim Population between 1970 and the year 2000

Year	Population of Muslims in Africa	Total Population of Africa
1970	143,095,965	2,151,029,875
1990	251,066,766	3,192,397,000
2000	317,374,423	3,696,988,097

Source: <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/religions-in-africa.htm> (accessed 20 May 2010)

Mapping these statistics provides yet another dimension of the spread of Muslims across the continent. Figure 18.2 offers a graphic overview of the Muslim population's spread; this may be viewed as a fair representation of their spread.

Socio-historical background of Muslims (7th to the late 19th century)

Before discussing African Muslims in the 20th Century, it is important to assess their socio-historical background from the 7th to 19th century. This will help us understand how the earlier developments are interrelated to the events that unfolded in the early 20th century. Muslims have been growing numerically on the African continent since the 7th century. Table 18.4 summaries in six phases the major events that relate to the growth of Islam.

Table 18.4: Phases of Islam's Spread¹²

Phases	Agency	Time-line	Geographical spread
Phase 1	Conquerors	635-1050	Along northern part of the Sahara to Morocco on the Atlantic side.
Phase 2	Traders and migrants	11 th – 12 th centuries	Along the east coast of Africa from the Horn until the middle part of Mozambique.
Phase 3	Traders/Sufi Shaykhs	12 th and 16 th centuries	From the northern part of Africa across the Sahara into Tropical Africa and the western part of West Africa towards the east.
Phase 4	Jihadists, Sufi Shayhs, Missionaries	17 th – 19 th centuries	Jihad oriented movements in West Africa and the formation of the Sultanates/ Khaliphate.
Phase 5	Brotherhoods/Colonialists	17 th and 18 th – 19 th centuries	Transfer of slaves as cheap labour from Southeast Asia and South Asia to Southern Africa.
Phase 6	Missionaries/organisations	20 th and 21 st	West, East and South Africa

North Africa

Muslims entered North Africa via Egypt in the mid 630s and soon succeeded in radically transforming that region. As a consequence, they left their footprints and a rich legacy that are present to this day. The early Muslim armies rooted themselves by setting up garrisons that created opportunities for trade and the exchange of ideas.

Various methods of conversion to Islam were witnessed from that period onwards. Three major methods were used: intermarriage, procreation and Arabisation. Those who wished to remain faithful to their Jewish and Christian traditions were required to pay special taxes so as to enjoy protection of Muslims. These methods and other complementary strategies made non-Muslim subjects accept their new status and show undisputed loyalty to their new rulers.

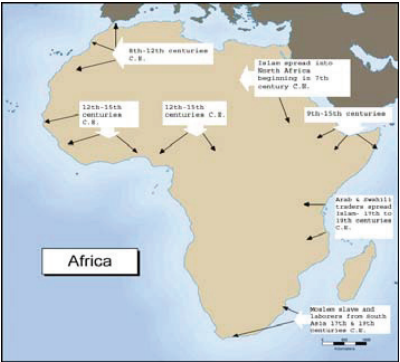
¹²The information in this table was based on Kokole 1995, Hiskett 1984: 19-20; Clarke 1982: 8. Also see Nehemia Levtzion's 'Towards a comparative study of Islamization' in *Conversion to Islam* (ed. N. Levtzion). New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers Inc. 1979: 1-23.

Muslim empires flourished in the region with one following another in succession. These included Umayyads (661-750), Abbasids (750-1258) and Ottomans (1260-1924).¹³ By the 11th century and thereafter, Muslims had become and remained the dominant force along the North African coast. Significant groups such as the Fatimids, Ayyubids and the Mamluks came onto the scene and subsequently disappeared only to be replaced by others.

The Fatimids, for example, conducted trade across North Africa and via the Red Sea. The Murabitun (Almoravids) and Muwahhidun (Almohads) were dominant groups along the western part of North Africa during the 11th and 12th centuries respectively. They penetrated into the interior, crisscrossed the Sahara, connected and traded with the inhabitants of West Africa. Figure 18.3 shows the spread of Muslims at various historical periods.

Figure 18.3: Islam’s Historical Spread Across Africa

Spread of Muslims across Africa



Source: www.exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu

West Africa

As the power of the Almoravids and Almohads weakened and eventually waned, the spread of Islam slowed down considerably during the 13th century. By then, the Muslims gradually shifted to the South Western Sahara, an area that had and still today has a fairly inhospitable terrain. Famous individuals such as Sidi Muhammad Al-Kunti

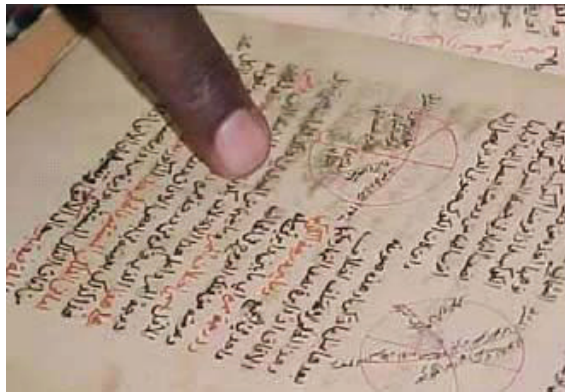
¹³Marshall Hodgson’s *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1974. 3 volumes.

(Mauritania) and Mansa Musa (Mali) also established strong kingdoms; Mansa Musa, for example, made his mark when he ruled between 1312 and 1337. The formation of these kingdoms resulted in the establishment of important centres of learning such as Timbuktu. The centre at Timbuktu, which flourished in the 15th and 16th centuries respectively, managed to secure and preserve manuscripts in Arabic and local languages written in Arabic script. The manuscripts covered a variety of fields – from Astronomy to Islamic theological sciences. Some are still preserved to this day and are tangible evidence of the rich heritage the scholars left behind.¹⁴

However, Islam's presence did not end during this period or with these well-known scholars. It continued to stretch to Songhay, Air (the region of Agades), Volta and Hausaland. This went on until the people in these regions became familiar with the beliefs and practices of Islam. Muslims of course, brought along their distinct schools of jurisprudence, the rich variety of theological schools and the different influential *sufi tariqahs* (orders).

Figure 18.4: A Timbuktu Manuscript – a Sample

Timbuktu Manuscript



Source: www.timbuktufoundation.org

¹⁴Yusuf Ibis, "Timbuktu: a Refuge for Scholarly and Righteous Work" in *Sudanica Africa*, 2003, 12, 13-20.; John Hunwick, "Timbuktu: A Bibliography", in *Sudanica Africa*, 2003, 12, 115-129. Also see Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Diagne (ed.) *The Meaning of Timbuktu*, Pretoria: Human Science Research Council, 2008; Riason Naidoo, "The South African – Mali Project: The Timbuktu Manuscripts", in *The Thinker* vol. 9: 56-60, 2009.

The growth of Islam in West Africa has generally been associated with the formation of a plethora of Muslim empires and city-states. For example, this phenomenon was experienced in Ghana between the 8th and the 11th centuries and in Mali between the 10th and the 15th centuries.¹⁵ From the 16th century to the 19th century, trade among Islamised North Africans (i.e. the Moroccans) grew rapidly. This resulted in the revival of Islam in certain areas and consolidation in others.

Largely, the nascent Muslim communities adopted a fairly tolerant attitude towards those who stuck to their African traditional practices whilst espousing the rudimentary beliefs of Islam. Such was the case despite the jihad that was undertaken by the Maliki inspired Muslims across West Africa at different historical moments.

Even though, there were a few instances where intolerance crept in and gave way to militant elements led by jihadists such as Usman dan Fodio (d. 1817) and Al-Hajj 'Umar Tal (d. 1864). Usman dan Fodio founded the renowned Sokoto Khaliphate (1809-1906) while Al-Hajj 'Umar Tal established the Tukolor empire.

Some of these leaders adopted a more purist approach to practicing Islam. They fused their *Sufi* inclinations with theological thinking rooted in the Arabian Peninsula where the Hanbalite trained Muhammad ibn 'Abdul Wahhab advocated the purification of Islam from any sort of accretions and syncretism.

But in spite of their attempts to broaden and deepen the Hanbalite/Wahhabite puritanical ideas, the Sufi orders continued to dominate the West African landscape. Two examples of such order were the Qadriyyah and the Khalwatiyyah. These two orders and others competed for influence and dominance. In the end, they had an impact on the quality and expression of Islam in West African.¹⁶

Also, these orders played a crucial role in the reaction that followed the arrival of colonial forces in West Africa.¹⁷ When the colonial forces appeared, Muslims were faced with two options; either to oppose them as intruders or accommodate and work alongside them.

The groups led by Sufi shaykhs, chose to accommodate the colonialists. In return, they were allowed to continue to control their followers and spread Islam, but with a rider. They were to remain loyal to the colonial rulers.

The colonial rulers fought and discriminated against those Muslims who chose to oppose them. Many of the Muslims were vanquished and subjugated. They (Muslims)

¹⁵Ira Lapidus, "Islam in 20th Century Africa" in *A history of Islamic societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002: 401-405.

¹⁶Knut S. Vikor "Sufi Brotherhoods in Africa." In Nehemia Levtzion & Randall L. Pouwels (ed.) *The History of Islam in Africa*. Cape Town: David Phillips. 2000, Pt. IV, Ch. 20 pp. 441-476. And consult Amy Johnson's Religion, Colonial Africa: Islamic Orders and Movements. In *Encyclopedia of African History* (ed. Kevin Shellington). New York: Fitzroy Dearborn. 2005, 3: 1253-1254, David Westerlund & Eva Evers Rosander (ed.). 1997. *African Islam and Islam in Africa*. London: Hurst & Co, and Marshall Hodgson's 'The Sufism of the Tariqah Orders, c. 945-1273' in *The Venture of Islam* Chicago: CUP 2: 201-254, 1974.

¹⁷John O. Voll, *Islam: Continuity & Change in the Modern World*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994.

suffered more because they were denied fair trading practices, educational opportunities and appointment to political positions.

*East Africa*¹⁸

When we compare the French colonial policies in West Africa to those of their British counterparts in other parts of Africa, then we note how they differ from one another as regards the communities they colonized; instead of harshly subjugating them the way the French did, the British imposed and implemented the divide and rule policy towards all the colonized subjects that included a sizeable number of African Muslims.

Nonetheless, Muslims are said to have entered and penetrated East Africa at a very earlier period. However, this was much later than 635 when the Muslims set foot in Egypt. Although some sources say that Muslims landed in Mogadishu as early as 732, this may not be entirely true for it is based on mere speculation rather than hard evidence.

Historical records, moreover, show that the Muslims made gradual inroads below the Sudanic belt between the 9th and the 12th centuries. Also, Islam in this region was spread by traders and travellers, not conquerors or jihadists as happened in North Africa.

These historical records from early contacts illustrate that by end of the 9th century and particularly in the 10th century, the local communities had not been Arabised as had happened in North Africa. And they had also established large scale settlements.

The penetration of Islam was generally slow because it was made through the agents of trade and missionaries. Those who were in the vanguard in these early periods were the Hadramis who hailed from the western part of the Arabian Peninsula. The others were the 'Umanis who came from the south eastern part of the same peninsula.

The interaction and socialisation resulted in a gradual mixture of Arab and Somali cultures. The resulting mixture was very distinct from the cultural mix in West Africa and North Africa respectively. The seafaring Muslims navigated their way around the horn of Africa to the Shebele River and beyond. This part was referred to as the land of the Barbaras (the coast of Somalia).

After landing in Mogadishu, they subsequently moved further down south to Pemba. They eventually renamed this stretch – the land of the Zanj (coast of Kenya and Tanzania). With time, they trekked down the coast until they reached Cape Delgado (present-day Mozambique) which they renamed the land of Sofala.¹⁹

Thereafter, they dominated that region for more than two centuries until the arrival of the Portuguese, German and British colonial powers. Trade began to increase and

¹⁸Ali Kettani's 'Muslims in East Africa: An Overview' in *Journal of Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*. 4(1/2): 104-119, 1982 and Abdul Aziz Lodhi's 'Muslims in Eastern Africa: Their Past and Present.' In *Nordic Journal of African Studies*. 3(1): 88-98, 1994.

¹⁹Lapidus, "Islam in the 20th Century Africa": 432-435.

flourish when the Abbasid caliphs lost power in mid 13th century. The trade was mainly between South Arabia and East Africa as well as regions as far as South Asia and South East Asia.

Muslims monopolised the East African coast and traded in a variety of products from nut-meg to gold. By the 14th century Muslim city-states had been established along the coast. Lamu, Malindi, Kilwa and Sofala became the most important ports and centres not only for trade but also for learning. Throughout this period, Muslims limited their trade activities along the coast. They only started venturing into the hinterlands in the 15th century.

Their trek into the interior brought more Africans into fold of Islam. This resulted in the transformation of the East African coast from a predominantly seafaring and coastal Arab identity to an African Muslim presence.²⁰ The Muslims went as far as the inner regions of central Africa. These included the present Great Lake States (Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda), Democratic Republic of the Congo and Malawi. They also moved as far as the Zimbabwean ruins. Others argue that they even went further and entered the northern part of what is today known as South Africa.

The Lemba tribe found along the borders of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique are said to be the offspring of these Muslims. However, using DNA tests, Jewish scholars have disputed the theory that the Lemba are one of lost tribes of the Jewish faith.²¹

As a consequence of the more than a century of socialisation and interaction, the Swahili culture and language developed. These have ever since remained an integral part of the East African Muslim identity. Unlike the Muslims in West Africa who were Malikis, the Swahili speaking East African Muslims were predominantly Shafis and Ibadis.

However, like some groups and regions in West Africa, the Muslim communities came under the spell of the sufi tariqah particularly the Qadriyyah and the Shadhhdilis. These tariqahs acted as important unifying strands along the east coast and especially when the Portuguese colonial powers landed there in the 16th century. The Catholic Portuguese not only disliked the Muslims, who they regarded as heathens, but also feared them. Despite the Portuguese's fighting power and strength they had an extremely difficult time in subduing Muslims.

Though they succeeded in Sofala and the surrounding areas, they failed to subjugate Muslims in the upper regions of the coast. In fact, by then the Umanis became a

²⁰cf. David C. Sperling's *The Coastal Hinterland and Interior of East Africa*. In Nehemia Levtzion & Randall L. Pouwels (ed.) *The History of Islam in Africa*. Cape Town: David Phillips. 2000, Pt. III Ch. 13, 273-302.

²¹cf. R. Gayre "The Lembas and Vendas of Vendaland," *The Mankind Quarterly* 8 (1967): 3-15 and T. Parfitt, *Journey to the Vanished City: The Search for a Lost Tribe of Israel*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992 (reprint New York: Vintage, 2000). Also view the www.pbs.org documentary and P. Tyson's "The Mystery of Great Zimbabwe," *The Lost Tribes of Israel*, Nova, Public Broadcasting Service, 2000.

powerful force that countered them and others in the late 17th century (circa 1660 – 1698). The latter captured Mombasa by 1698. By 1840, Zanzibar also came under their rule. From then onwards, it became the capital of Umanis.

One of the prominent Umani rulers was Sayyid Sa'id ibn Sultan (d. 1856). Sayyid resisted and confronted German and British colonialists, but was later captured. Apart from Sayyid, there were other well-known sufi shaykhs such as Shaykh Ma'ruf (d. 1905) and Shaykh 'Uways ibn Muhammad Al-Barawi (d. 1909). The two came into conflict with Shaykh Muhammad 'Abdullah Hasan (d. 1920) – who the British referred to as 'The Mad Mullah.' He valiantly fought against the Italians and British, and contributed immensely to Islamic education that served his needs and later other communities along the coast. These shaykhs not only stood up against the colonial powers but also trained many scholars. The scholars in turn, migrated and influenced developments in the Somalia, Comoros, Zanzibar and many other places.

*Southern Africa*²²

Muslims made their contribution in terms of trade and producing Somali and Swahili literature in the Arabic script along the Eastern coast.²³ Whilst they settled in the late 16th century and in the mid 19th century, two major events were unfolding further south of the east African coast. The events involved the British and the Dutch as discussed below.

First, the Dutch conquered and colonised the Cape of Good Hope (the South western part of South Africa). After establishing themselves in the territory, they brought Muslims from Southeast and South Asia as political prisoners and slaves. These groups of Muslims were thus restricted to certain areas in the Cape. Despite the strict laws imposed on Muslims to restrict and contain their movements, they found ingenious ways of defiance. Thus, they not only managed to maintain their Muslim identity but also continued to spread Islam among the slave community by establishing educational circles. Through the circles, the nascent Muslim community benefited from some of the leading Muslim theologians who penned theological scripts in Afrikaans using the

²²See the entries in Muhammed Haron and Suleiman E. Dangor's (ed.) *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Islamic Civilization in Southern Africa*. Istanbul: IRCICA 2009; Robert Shell's 'Islam in Southern Africa' in *The History of Islam in Africa* (eds. Nehemia Levtzion & Randall L. Pouwels). Cape Town: David Phillips 2000; Abdul Kader Tayob's. Southern Africa. In *Islam outside the Arab World* (eds. David Westerlund & Ingvar Svanberg). Richmond: Curzon. 1999 pp. 111-124; Ephraim Mandivenga's 'Islam in Southern Africa' in *Religion and Politics in Southern Africa* (eds. C. Hallencreutz & M. Palmberg). Uppsala: The University of Uppsala 1991 and Muhammad Amra's 'Islam in Southern Africa: A Historical Survey' in *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Islamic Civilization in Eastern Africa* (eds. Abdu Kasozi & Sadik Unay). Istanbul: IRCICA. 2006, 99-118.

²³John Hunwick (ed.) *Arabic Literature in Africa: Project & Publication*, Northwestern University: The Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa. And Muhammed Haron's "Africa's variety of Arabo-Islamic Literatures: An Overview," *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 2008, 45: 5-18, Autumn.

Arabic script. This took place in the very midst of the Dutch colonisers who were oblivious of these developments.²⁴

In due course, the steady rate at which Muslims numbers were growing began to alarm the Dutch and the British. Even though Christian missionaries were unleashed to contain this growth, still the increase appeared unstoppable. Second, the British were firmly settled along the eastern part of South Africa by the mid 19th century. After setting up huge farms, they became desperate for labourers to work on their expanding sugar plantations. Thus, they brought Indian Muslims from South Asia to work on the farms. Others came as free traders. Most of them belonged to the Hanafi School of jurisprudence. These Indian Muslims moved into the hinterland, settled and eventually remained as traders.

Although numerous laws restricted them from travelling from one town to another, they sought ways of disobedience. They managed to set up shop and make business. By the end of the 19th century, many Cape Muslims (mainly Shafi'is) became artisans and worked in the emerging industries such as clothing and building.

The Scramble for Africa

Many contemporary scholars have shown the role colonialism played as an agency in either hindering the spread of Islam or in facilitating its spread. The British colonial approaches and strategies in different parts of the African continent differed significantly from those of their French counterparts.

The 'scramble for Africa' began in 1860. This term was apparently coined in 1884 and later articulated by Basil Davidson in his *Search for Africa: A History in the Making* (1963) and further explored by Thomas Pakenham in his *The Scramble for Africa* (1991). This era of scramble and partition took about 20 odd years in which European powers explored and conquered much of the African continent.²⁵

Various agents facilitated the spread of Islam over the centuries as shown in Table 18.4. Whilst some attribute the spread of Islam during Phase 1 to conquerors, later developments were initiated by traders and sufi shaykhs. The local merchants and ordinary people were among the first to embrace Islam through commercial interaction with migrating traders. The elites only joined this new tradition at a later stage.

Although Muslim empires and city-states flourished in the late 18th and 19th centuries, they did not Islamise the whole of West or East Africa. Full Islamisation was only witnessed in the earlier centuries in North Africa. Islam gained many adherents over the centuries. By the end of the 19th century, the religious tradition had a sizeable following in West Africa's hinterland. It had also shaped the East African coast, giving

²⁴Muhammed Haron's 'A Portrait of the Arabic Script at the Cape' in *Sudanic Africa: A Journal of Historical Sources*. 2003, 14:33-54; his 'Preservation and Study of South Africa Ajami Manuscripts' in *South African Archives Journal*. 42: 53-60, 2001/2002, and his 'Arabic-Afrikaans: A Vehicle for Identity Formation rather than Integration' in *Islam et Societie au Afrika du Sud*. 2:163-179, January 2010.

²⁵Azevedo 1998, Ch. 6, 114-115.

it a domineering Muslim image as stated before. In the same period in South(ern) Africa, Muslims remained a small but vocal minority.

In a nutshell, Africa's Muslims have never been a homogenous society. Ethno-religious and linguistic cleavages have manifested themselves across the Muslim population. In the mid 17th century Maghrib North Africa Islam was carried forward by the Berber speaking tribes. By the mid 18th century, the Hausa speakers were the flag bearers of Islam in West Africa. In the 19th century Swahili speakers were responsible for taking Islam from the coast into East Africa's hinterland.

In South Africa, 'Cape Malays' and Indian Muslims represented the face of Islam. Occasionally, these communities were embroiled in intra-theological and jurisprudential conflicts as have been borne out by the various existing religious texts. However, the conflicts were not only of an intra-theological nature. There were occasions when intra-religious conflicts broke out in the regions known as the Sudanic belt. Both Nigeria and Sudan are located along this belt. It is in these regions (before they became nation-states) that Muslims not only came into contact with Christianity but also competed with it. Christianity was brought by the European colonial powers. Because of the negative perceptions Europeans had of the local communities that they colonised, they naturally favoured Christianity and missionary oriented traditions. The respective competitive spirit expressed by Muslims and Christians resulted in sporadic inter-religious conflicts that, at times, marred the continent's generally tolerant image.

The Twentieth Century Scene

The 20th century was without doubt the Dawning of a New Era. At the dawn of the century, Muslim heartlands were generally under the control of the Ottoman Turks. However, the Ottoman Empire was in turmoil and indeed on a rapid decline. The colonial forces had by then already spread their tentacles into the heart of Muslim lands. They gradually leveraged their position to decrease the powers of the Ottomans using the laws of capitulation. They also instigated ethnic groups – particularly Arabs to revolt against Turkish rule. Their schemes succeeded gradually leading to acquisition of land from the weakened Ottoman sultans.

The eventual outcome of these socio-political developments was that colonial powers partition the lands among themselves and constrained the spread of Muslim polities. This development coincided with the weakening and ultimate break-up of Ottoman Empire. By 1924, the empire had to ultimately accept the dethroning of the khaliphate and the formation of the Republic of Turkey under the leadership of Kemal Ataturk, the secular ruler. What did this mean to Muslims on the African continent?

Muslim minorities identified with the idea of a khaliphate even though it only symbolised unity in an ideal sense. So, the developments in the Muslim heartlands were critical to them. The abrupt effacing of the khaliphate by Ataturk was considered a sad moment in Muslim history. It was viewed as a death-knell to the actual 'unity' of Muslims across the world.

The khaliphate was and remained a significant institution for the Muslims. It symbolised the unity of the *ummah* not only across geographical regions but trans-historically from the 7th century to the beginning of the 20th century. It is this symbol that inspired large sections of Muslim communities in Africa and elsewhere to work hard towards the revival and reform of Islam.

*North Africa*²⁶

North Africa has been identified with early Islam which started more than 1400 years ago. Like other parts of the continent, North Africa was under the hegemony of the colonial powers. The British and the French were the dominant colonial powers on the continent by the end of the 19th century. The Dutch, Belgians, Germans, Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese and other colonial powers occupied only small portions of the vast continent (cf. Figure 18.5).

The Portuguese, Spaniards and Dutch gave way to the stronger colonial powers because their powers waned and they became weak. The British and French were very cunning. When they entered the continent, they quickly transformed their commercial objectives into political objectives.²⁷ They rushed for the most valuable lands where rich mineral deposits and other products were ‘discovered’ on the continent.

In fact, when they discovered gold and diamond deposits, they quickly claimed the rights and control. They were relentless in the manner they made their claims to the extent that they did not share the proceeds with either the local inhabitants or the subjugated nations.²⁸ In the final analysis, they ‘determined the political configuration of modern African societies’.²⁹ The colonisers made every effort to ensure that they controlled all commercial activities. To achieve this, they applied the principle of ruling through the intermediary of local leaders. The local leaders were in turn supervised by French or British viceroys. Despite stiff opposition, the French and British brought about radical socio-economic changes that, of course, worked mainly in their interest. The infrastructure such as roads and railroads that were constructed served the ultimate politico-economic objectives that the colonial powers had set for themselves.

²⁶John P. Entiles’ *Islam, Democracy and the State in North Africa*. Indiana University Press 1997.

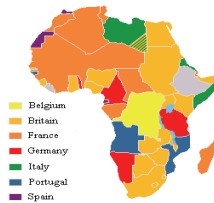
²⁷Lapidus: 441.

²⁸Consult Thomas Pakenham’s *The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1991 and also read Mario Azevedo’s “European Exploration and the Conquest of Africa.” In Marion Azevedo (ed.) *Africana Studies*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press. 1998, Pt. II Ch. 6, 107-120.

²⁹Lapidus: 732.

Figure 5: Africa's Colonial Powers by 1900

Scramble for Africa: Colonial Powers



Source: www.library.thinkquest.org

In North Africa, the situation was not smooth sailing for the colonial powers. They faced constant protests and rebellion. In general, the colonial forces were too strong for the North African Muslims who stretched from Egypt to Morocco. The communities were too weak to stand up and challenge the mighty rule of these powers. In Algeria and Morocco, the French ruled with an iron-fist. In Egypt, the British applied the divide-and-rule policy.

Opposition Groups

The North African Muslims were in actual fact powerless compared to the colonial powers. They could not stop the influence of these powers, and nor could they prevent the Ottoman Empire's eventual fall in the early 1920s. Muslims were of course, inspired by the nationalist call which united all anti-colonial forces. The growing opposition groups used any available methods to agitate against the docile and incompetent rulers who were in cahoots with the colonial powers. These methods included the print media which they used to voice their opposition and opinion.

It should be noted that North Africa Muslims were generally caught up in the political rivalry between the British and French. Consequently, a combination of their nationalist aspirations and religious ideals created national movements supported by the majority. These movements were useful instruments in resisting colonial rule.

The 20th century ushered in protests, revolts and rebellions in different parts of the continent that had been in the offing. The ringleaders of these movements were apprehended and incarcerated.³⁰

Despite all their efforts to quell the rebellions and stave off the revolts, the colonial powers faced further protests and opposition. From 1900 onwards, Muslims agonised over whether to adopt western thought and practices or adhere to the basic Islamic teachings and practices. This was indeed a difficult decision to make.

Nonetheless, Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abdu (d. 1905) provided pragmatic and positive answers to this dilemma and related questions in the famous Transvaal fatwa (legal opinion).³¹ Muhammad was the then leading Shaykh at the renowned Al-Azhar University in Cairo. In fact, his views and those of his comrades laid the foundation of what came to be known as the Salafi tradition. This tradition was also weaved into the call for Pan-Islamism at the end of the 19th century in the Muslim heartlands.

Although the Salafi tradition later increasingly became influential, it was challenged by those who were not prepared to adapt or change to patterns of modernity. This group preferred to hold onto their conservative views and practices. The other North African who bought into the Salafi tradition was ‘Abdullah ibn Idris As-Sanusi (d. 1931). He hailed from Morocco, which was independent from the Ottoman influence at the end of the 19th century. Here, the Sultans had to contend with the sufi shaykhs who challenged his rule.

The Moroccans were generally inclined towards reformism and avoided militant revolts as was observed in neighbouring Algeria and Libya. In Algeria the dominant tariqahs were the Darqawiyyah and Tijaniyyah. They opposed both the Turkish and French representatives. Since the Tijaniyyah fancied working with the French after they ousted the Turkish representative, they were opposed by others who rejected French rule all together.

Amir ‘Abdul Qadir (d. 1883) led the anti-French rebellion. This resulted in a continuous struggle against the French, developing into a very frosty relationship that persisted into the 20th century. In 1881, Shaykh Muhammad Ahmad ibn As-Sayyid ‘Abdullah rebelled against the Turks and Egyptians. After successfully pushing them out, he set up the Mahdist state which lasted until 1898. It was a joint British-Egyptian force that helped the British to get a foothold in the Sudan.

In general, the reaction of North African Muslims to colonialism differed from one region to another. Whereas some regions adapted their ways towards modernism, others vehemently stood up against the colonial powers. They rejected the western and secular ideas imposed on them. Amidst these developments, the desire to achieve nationalist ideals was gaining support. For example, individuals such as Ahmad Lutfi Sayyid advocated this approach. Ahmad founded the Egyptian People’s Party in 1907

³⁰M. K. Asanti, *The History of Africa: The quest for Eternal Harmony*, London: Routledge, 2007: 232-247.

³¹C.C. Adams “Muhammad Abdu and the Transvaal Fatwa.” In *The MacDonald Presentation Volume* (ed. W.G. Shellabear et al) Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1933: 13-29.

which emphasised the importance and beauty of Arab culture *vis-à-vis* British or French culture.

When World War I broke out in 1914, Muslims later found themselves on both sides of the Entente Powers and the Central Powers. The Ottoman Turks were on the side of the Central Powers while others were on the side of the Entente Powers. The Central Powers were led by the Austro-Hungarians and Germans while the Entente Powers were led by Britain, France, and others. The defeat of the Central Powers also meant the final blow to the Ottoman Empire's existence. When World War II took place between 1939 and 1945, Muslims were once again forced to take a stand. The choice was between the Allies led by Britain and France or the Axis led by Germany and Italy.

Since the North African Campaign took place on their soil, North African Muslims had no choice but to participate. The campaign started in 1940 and ended in 1943. In fact, WWII postponed the struggle of the nationalist movements in Africa for independence. This was the case with Egypt which had achieved partial independence in 1922. The outcome of WWII not only reshaped Europe but it also affected the Muslim societies who yearned for total independence from the European colonial powers. They were thus led by their respective charismatic leaders and nationalist movements. One of the foremost Muslim organizations that emerged in North Africa and the Middle East - and to which we shall return shortly - was the Ikhwan ul-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood) that was established by Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949) in 1929; it was subsequently influenced by ideologues such as Sayed Qutb (d. 1966). This organization not only influenced the thinking of Muslim groups in the Muslim heartlands but also those residing along the periphery in Africa.

Figure 18.6: A Process of Decolonisation

Period of Decolonization in Africa



Source: www2.ivcc.edu/

*West Africa*³²

In West and East Africa similar reactions to colonial rule were expressed and demonstrated. Along the East African coast the militant sufi tariqahs not only fought the colonial powers but also their rivals. The Salihyyah order that was led by Shaykh Hasan was one of the leading movements that prolonged the anti-colonial struggle into the early 20th century. This movement and others were inspired by the Muslim activists in the Muslim heartlands and also influenced by what John Voll in 1994 called the neo-Sufi tradition and pan-Islamism.³³

The developments were slightly different in West Africa under the French. The French used the sufi shaykhs to work in their interest. As a result, they allowed the sufi shaykhs to preach their doctrines and enhance their support base. But, they were required to observe the policies categorically laid down by the French.

One of the prominent sufi tariqahs that accepted French rule was a sub-branch of the Qadriyyah, namely the Muridiyyah. Led by Shaykh Ahmad Bamba (d. 1927), this tariqah adopted a less militant style and encouraged its followers to plough the fields and earn their keep. The order was partially instrumental in the birth of Senegal.

In Mauritania the circumstances were far from ideal. However, with the spread of the tariqahs under sufi shaykhs it was able to smooth out the differences and stabilise the emerging state. Qadriyyah shaykh Muḥamad Mustapha Ma'al-Aynayn (d. 1910) was one of the important figures who challenged the French. In West Africa, both the majority and minority Muslim communities participated fully in the nationalist struggle. They fought alongside their co-strugglers irrespective of whether they were African religious traditionalists, Christians or secularist. They had one clear objective – the desire for 'independence' just like many other communities across the continent.

Neo-Colonial Era: Muslims in and Beyond the Nation-States

The end of WWII ushered in the Cold War era. This period saw African states gain their (so-called) independence one after the other. The Muslims who participated in the nationalist movements were influenced by the twin processes of secularism and modernism. Therefore, they came heavily under the influence of Western European modes of thinking.

During these times the communists were also wooing supporters. They had extended their sphere of influence to different parts of the African continent. Consequently, Muslims were once again torn between these two major ideological camps. Those who invariably received their education in the colonial schools did not resist secularism and or modernity. They naturally sided with the capitalist system, with only a few exceptions. However, many defied the colonial authorities and refused to attend their schools. Their main fear was that they would be Christianised. They therefore

³²Lamin Sanneh's *The Crown and the Turban* 1997; Christopher Harrison's *France and Islam in West Africa 1860-1960* 2003; William F. S. Miles' *Political Islam in West Africa: State-Society Relations Transformed* 2007.

³³Voll 1994, 136.

kept their distance and remained devoted to their traditional Muslim schools in the rural and urban areas.

Those who considered socialism closer to Islam, hence a better alternative leaned towards the communist system. This system seemed to offer the required responses to the ills that societies in Africa were facing. Thus, Muslims in general and African Muslims in particular were forced to deal with a totally different struggle – a struggle that demanded new innovative leadership and critical responses. Muslims later formed part of the new nation-states that they had helped create. However, secularism and modernity continued to impact upon their beliefs, practices and lifestyles in general.

During the period of the struggle for independence in Africa, the North African states were sort of divided. Whereas some expressed their desire for independence unilaterally, others used the vehicle of pan-Arabism to forge ties among themselves and portray a common cause and struggle. Since the leadership was influenced by secular and socialist trends, they decided to follow the non-religious path in creating nation-states.

Majority Muslim Nation-States: Between Secularism and Shari'a

Although the nation-states did not reject religion, the government consciously opted not to give it primary attention. It therefore remained an important part of their identity, but a private matter for the individual as emphasised by the state. The attitude that they adopted towards religion demonstrated that they were indeed influenced by the new liberal ideas borrowed from Europe. Some Muslim movements such as Egypt's *Ikhwan ul-Muslimin* (est. 1929) and Pakistan's *Jama'at al-Islami* (est. 1941) advocated the formation of theocratic governments. However, adoption of liberal ideas by North African nation-states militated against formation of such governments. Despite this, some theocratic governments were established towards the middle part of the 20th century.

The governments that were formed when they gained independence differed from one nation-state to another. For example, the Egyptians accepted the one party state since 1952 when Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power. The Moroccans, who gained independence in 1956, had to be satisfied with the installation of King Hasan II (d.1999) as their monarch during 1961. Many North African states staved off religious reformers who attempted to influence the outcome of the socio-political conditions. Even the armies in these states either intervened when required or took over power to replace weak leadership. This happened in the case of Egypt and also Libya.

Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi, an army officer staged a coup d'état against King Idris I in 1969 and came to power in Libya. Interestingly, he changed the name of the nation-state to 'Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Republic.' This name has remained to this day where he is still at the helm of state affairs. Sudan also faced the might of the army after it gained independence in 1956. Sudan's image has generally been tarnished because of the two major civil wars: the first was fought in the mid 1950s while the second in the 1980s. These wars lasted over many years. In 1983 General Gaafar Mohamed el-Nimeiri (c. 1969-1985) decided to impose Islamic law in the whole of Sudan. It was one of the many attempts to create an Islamic state in spite

of the sizeable number of non-Muslims in Southern Sudan. Brig. Omar Hasan Al-Bashir, who came to power in 1989, was declared president in 1993 and has been in that position ever since. During his reign he was engaged in a civil war with the Southerners; a war that ended at end of 2004. Many of the citizens in the South are African religious tradition adherents or Christians and during the April 2010 elections the southerners were clamouring for independence from the Khartoum government; only time will tell whether this will take place in the near future.

The above examples show how Muslims, who were the majority of citizens in the North African nation-states, adapted to the different types of political rule that had become the order of the day. In other regions across the continent, where the Muslims either formed considerable numbers or small minorities, they joined the liberation movements to oust the colonial powers. In some cases, they were an integral part of groups that eventually seized power upon the departure of colonial authorities. This was the case in Mozambique where individuals such as Sharffudin Muhammad Khan joined and officially represented FRELIMO in Cairo and Washington respectively. And the same may be said of South Africa where a number of Muslims were affiliated to the ANC and PAC respectively. Two prominent Muslim theologians were associated with these two liberation movements; Maulana Chachalia was a bona fide member of the ANC and represented it in India and Imam Abdullah Haron (d. 1969), though not a card carrying member was a close associate of and collaborated with the PAC³⁴.

Some social scientists argue that religious identity was of little importance during the nationalist struggle for liberation. All liberation movements in Africa emphasised national identity as opposed to ethnic or religious identities. After 'liberation' the socio-political circumstances gradually changed. Ethnicity and religiosity were quickly accepted as vehicles of further transformation during these changing times in the newly established African nation-states.

With the passage of time, Muslims realised their vulnerable position in the sub-Saharan nation-states and became more conscious of their religious identity. The result was, they banded together and formed advocacy Muslim organisations to serve their interests in particular. These developments, which took place in West, East and South Africa, were also complemented by a few external factors.

External Factors

It may be argued that the resurgence of religion and the importance of religious identity were somewhat propelled by a few external factors; these factors affected and influenced developments on the African continent during the post-colonial era. From amongst the list, there were the (Middle East) oil factor, the Iranian revolution, the

³⁴Siqvard von Sicard. 'Islam in Mozambique: Some Historical and Cultural Perspectives.' In *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 28(3): 473-490, 2008; Yousuf Dadoo 'Maulii Cachalia': The Contribution of a thinker, activist in the political liberation of South Africa in *Journal of Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 16 (1): 129-133, 1996 and Muhammed Haron, 'Towards a sacred biography: The life & thoughts of Imam Abdullah Haron.' In *Journal for Islamic Studies* 14:64-83, 1994.

Salman Rushdie Affair, the Afghanistan people's struggle against its Marxist regimes (c. 1978-1992), and the two Gulf wars. In the following paragraphs we shall only focus on the first two to demonstrate how they impacted upon socio-political and religious developments in parts of Africa.

The Oil Factor: 1973

One of the international factors that triggered off some of these developments at the beginning of the 1970s was what Mazrui calls the oil-factor.³⁵ Mazrui argued that the oil-factor was one of the agencies used during the neo-colonial phase to reinforce the Islamisation process witnessed over many centuries on the continent.

The Arab (Muslim) world was in a fairly strong position at that time because of their huge oil reserves. The various Arab states that possessed these reserves realised that they could influence world events in their favour. Since the Palestinian crisis was somewhat of a thorn in their flesh and one of their main concerns, they decided to use the 'oil weapon' to woo African countries to their side especially those that had sizeable Muslim populations. They eventually succeeded in influencing some events and winning some states. This brought about rapprochement between Arabs and Africans³⁶.

It may therefore be argued that the oil factor contributed substantially towards the improvement of Afro-Arab relations. The Arab oil states extended to African states the desired financial aid. In return, the African states adopted a more aggressive stance towards Israel's – the Zionist state – policies. Although 'Islam' played a significant role in cementing Afro-Arab relations, its representatives also appropriated it in a manner that led to divisions. Kokoli³⁷ correctly decries in his analysis the divisions that occurred among the African Muslim ummah because of these Arab states wanting to extend their spheres of influence through national and local Muslim organizations.

Since Saudi Arabia was the leading oil producer, it realised that its oil wealth could be employed strategically to influence events and developments in its favour in African states. In the 1970s and the 1980s it has used the regional and international bodies to promote Islam and to draw support from African in taking a strong anti-Zionist stand. Such bodies include the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), The

³⁵See texts and articles on this theme that have been produced by the International Institute of Islamic Thought, which is based in Washington, D.C. One of its leading founding members who advocated 'Islamisation' was Professor Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi. In Southeast Asia, Professor Naguib al-Attas also mooted this concept whilst he was head of the ISTAC, which is currently attached to the International Islamic University of Malaysia.

³⁶Arye Oded's *Africa and the Middle East Conflict*. London & Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publications, 1987; Philip Frankel 'The Arabs in Africa: Islamic Philanthropy or Petro-Colonialism' in *International Affairs Bulletin*. 3(3):26-36, Dec. 1979 and Michael Curtis' 'Africa, Israel and the Middle East' in *Middle East Review* 27(4):5-22, Summer 1985.

³⁷Omar H. Kokoli "Religion in Afro-Arab Relations: Islam and Cultural Changes in Modern Africa," in Nura Alkali et al (ed.) *Islam in Africa: Proceedings of the Islam in Africa Conference*, Lagos: Spectrum Book Limited. 1993: 240-245.

Arab League and the African Union. This it has done with the support of the North African states, which are predominantly Arab and who promoted Pan-Arabism.

Saudi Arabia, through its international NGOs, created networks of Muslim organisations in many African countries. These included the Mecca based Muslim World League (MWL) and Riyadh based World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). MWL linked up with traditional theological bodies to offer scholarships and distribute Wahhabite slanted literature. WAMY on its part joined Muslim youth groups across the world and also made similar overtures to them. These bodies were, however, later challenged by the Iranians soon after the Islamic revolution of Iran took place in 1979.

Iran's 1979 Revolution

The formation of the 1979 Islamic Republic of Iran, which came about as a consequence a bloodless revolution, inspired communities around the world in the manner in which the Iranians deposed the Shah. The Shah like the Saudi Arabian monarchy was considered a despot and a staunch ally of the USA and the West.

Amidst these socio-political developments, Ayatollah Khomeini was able to muster support both in exile and inside Iran. He then overthrew the Shah, a very close ally of the USA. Even though this worried the USA, it was unable to stop the revolutionary momentum that eventually forced the Shah out of Iran. Khomeini succeeded him as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The appointment of Ayatollah Khomeini as head of the Islamic Republic was viewed as a milestone in contemporary geo-politics. It marked the beginning of a new era for the Iranians' newly formed Islamic state in particular and Muslim world at large³⁸.

As Iran's stature grew and influence increased in the geo-political arena during the 1980s, it pro-actively invested in the Third world nation-states located in Asia and Africa. Since it subtly employed its Iranian identity to advance its socio-religious Shi'ite ideas as part of its investment package, it was challenged by the predominantly Sunni oriented Saudi Arabia in and outside Africa. In fact, Iran's religious ideas and its socio-political developments caused a stir among the Arabs who generally had a love-hate relationship with the Iranians.

Despite Saudi Arabia's attempts in dissuading Muslims from coming under Iran's influence, quite a few Muslim activists and organizations - in and beyond the Muslim heartlands - gained the renewed confidence that they previously lacked in bringing about socio-political reformation in their respective nation-states; they, in fact, petitioned their governments to follow suit.

In African states where Muslims were dominant, they felt that if they imitated the Iranians, they could bring about similar socio-political and religious changes. For African states with a minority of Muslims, what happened in Iran carried hope. To them, these changes would set off a string of other needed developments in Muslim heartlands.

³⁸Shireen T. Hunter. *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Unfortunately though, this was not to be. But, it should be noted that the Iranian revolution was indeed a catalyst for change and, more importantly, a concrete example of how religion could mix with politics for the benefit of society.

Whilst African Muslims by and large rejoiced this historical victory, gradually imported literature from Iran, and called for socio-religious and political change, the Iranians did not totally succeed in exporting their revolution. African Muslims in different parts of the continent – most of whom are Sunnis – refused to follow the Iranian Shi'a (theological) school of thought. Despite these setbacks for the Iranians, they were able to make inroads and sway small groups. These small groups that were attracted to the Shi'a school are to be found in west, east and southern Africa. They changed their ways of interpreting and understanding issues in the house of Islam. Their association with and sympathetic position towards Iran had benefits. Their members were provided with Iranian sponsorship opportunities to visit Iran or pursue studies at Shi'a religious centres such as the one located in Qum.

However, even though African students studied in Qum and Tehran, and though Iranian literature was freely distributed, disseminated and circulated, the conversion rate to Shi'i thought was minimal. In fact, those who remained sympathetic and converted to Shi'ism remained numerically small and un-influential. In areas such as East Africa, a sizeable Shi'a community has been present for generations. However, instead of being converted, they only offered public moral support for the Iranian cause.

Sunni believers on the other side challenged the Shi'a propaganda institutions. The Sunni were sponsored and supported by states such as Saudi Arabia. This challenge was spearheaded by the MWL and WAMY which we earlier mentioned and, to some degree, by Libya's World Islamic Call Society. The latter society, which has numerous – official and unofficial – African representatives, meet in Tripoli annually to review their activities, successes and failures. In addition to OIC – headquartered in Jeddah, Iran has held regional conferences such as the international Hajj (pilgrimage) conferences in order to monitor and manipulate developments in Muslim communities. Their wider scheme was to provide financial aid to boost the existing structures and establish structures that would advance its Iranian cause and interest.

As the home of the two sacred Muslim cities – Mecca and Medina – Saudi Arabia's position within the Muslim heartlands as compared to Iran has always been strong and secure. As already noted earlier, because of Saudi Arabia's rich oil reserves it used its position in world affairs to promote Islam in Africa and elsewhere. Although it enjoyed this position with the support of its international organisations such as the MWL and WAMY to forge ties with Muslim institutions and organisations in Africa, its religious interventions of behalf of Saudi Arabia were, for a short time, successfully challenged by Iran after it had set up regional branches of its organisations in some African states.

The African Muslims like their co-religionists in Asia demonstrated their support for the developments in the 1980s. Unfortunately, the Gulf war broke out and this engulfed part of the Muslim world, particularly the Iranians and the Iraqis, in an unwanted regional war. This was indeed a set-back that neither Iraqis nor Iranians fore-

saw. However, it is a conflict that the USA anxiously waited for in order to neutralise and weaken the two strongest Muslim armies in the region. The eight-year war drained these two states financially and emotionally. But even though Iran was embroiled in this war, it managed to export its ideas to countries such as Nigeria and Sudan where Muslims have been requesting and demanding socio-political (and religious) changes.

Sudan & Nigeria

In Sudan, the socio-political story was slightly different from that of Iran but it also had some common strands. When Numeiri imposed Sharia laws in the mid 1980s, his rule was immediately questioned by Western states that were opposed to the imposition of any form of Sharia laws. The Sudanese were, since then, debating the status and relevance of Sharia because the southern part was predominantly non-Muslim. The government, however, disregarded the southerners' pleas not to impose these laws and this partly contributed towards a civil war that lasted for more than two decades and ended at the end of 2004.

Turning to Nigeria, we witnessed the northerners clamouring for the implementation of Sharia laws. This raised major concerns among the predominantly Christian south who did not like this gesture. It is worth noting that the clamour coincided with the acceptance of Nigeria as a member state of the Organisation of Islamic Conference in 1986. The Sharia debate has persisted and continued to this day.

The impact of the external factors was an important lesson that was taken seriously in some quarters in sub-Saharan Africa. Muslims in some of these African states realized to what extent Saudi Arabia, Iran and Libya were playing religio-political games on the continent. Being aware of these activities, they tried to concentrate on their respective national and local organizations to further their aims and objectives. Whilst some chose to remain out of politics and participate in development projects that have been initiated by continental organizations such as the Kuwait sponsored Africa Muslim Agency and British based Islamic Relief Agency, others entered the political arena; from among the latter some either joined the (dominant) political parties in their respective countries or established their own. During the early period after independence, many Muslims in most instances supported and joined the parties as secularists—not motivated by religion. As secular nationalists, they played an important role during the early part of the post-colonial period. The positions of these secular nationalists were, however, subsequently challenged by nationalists who were steadily influenced by their religious ideals.

Challenges in the Post-Colonial Era: The 21st Century After the Cold War

During the post-colonial era, the trend to remain ardent secular nationalists - despite their Muslim upbringing - was common practice in the 1960s and 1970s. However the ongoing resurgence of religion in and outside the Muslim heartlands brought about changes in the thinking of the emerging generations. By the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s there was a shift in their understanding between religion and politics. All of these socio-political and religious transformations took place as the Cold war era was

drawing to a close; it was an era that started with the end of WWII and came to an end with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the destruction of the Berlin wall during 1989.

Specifically, the period referred to here is towards end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century – especially the first decade. In this period, Africa's Muslims faced numerous challenges which they continue to face to this day. This period was largely influenced by three processes: secularisation, modernisation and globalisation. By the end of the 20th century, they all collapsed into one – globalisation.

These processes have affected most African Muslims to this day – including those in the poorest nation-states and communities. Therefore, Muslims the world over and particularly in Africa have had to contend with a variety of challenges such as secularism, political participation, gender equality, cultural pluralism and religious fundamentalism. Whereas some such as secularism, gender equality and religious fundamentalism remain insurmountable, others such as political participation have not been difficult to deal with.

Globalisation

As a significant late 20th century process, globalization stimulated a variety of improvements around the world including changes in Africa. For Muslims, this process has had negative and positive outcomes on the African continent. It has, however, brought people closer because of the technological advances that had been made during the final two decades of the 20th century. Only the radio dominated the continent from the middle of the century³⁹. Moreover, electronic media, cell phones, ipods and numerous gadgets connected individuals and communities towards the end of the century.

Furthermore, because of the world-wide-web, internet cafes sprung up in remote villages in parts of Africa, and connected many people who were previously cut-off from world affairs. They have therefore become part of the new cyber communities. In many urban and peri-urban areas, cyber cafes attract many youths. They have mastered the art of surfing the web through trial and error. Many did not have to go through a schooling system. The absence of adequate facilities and basic school equipment has been an undoing especially in the rural areas. Technology has helped speed up the education process. In actual fact, it has changed the modes of learning about health care and the fight against fundamentalist groups.

Globalisation has brought along with it numerous negative aspects that have affected Muslims' relations with non-Muslims in different sectors and regions of the world. For example, when the Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*, which was banned by Khomeini and against which a *fatwa* (a Muslim legal edict) was issued in 1980s, and the 2006 Danish cartoons of Prophet Muhammad were circulated in the

³⁹For further reading on the impact of the mass media on the continent one should read Louise Bourgault's *MassMedia in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995 and Richard Fardon & Graham Furniss' edited text: *African Broadcast Cultures: Radio in Transition*. Cape Town: David Philip, 2000.

media, they created a major uproar among Muslims - including African Muslims – all over the world. As a result of the Muslims' violent reactions to these specific issues, the Muslims were and are still perceived in a very negative light.

The liberal-minded European communities viewed Muslims as undemocratic and retrogressive; and the Europeans also see Muslims as oppressive towards their women and as a religious community that do not appreciate human rights and nor the 'freedom of expression' principle. The general outcome of these attitudes as well as the tragic 9/11 event resulted in the rise of Islamophobia particularly in North America and Europe where substantial numbers of African Muslims reside. Let us briefly address the extent of Muslim participation in African political systems, before we comment on the twin questions of 'Terrorism' and 'Islamophobia' respectively.

African Muslim Political Participation

When reflecting upon Muslims involvement in politics, many of them did not abandon their secular national approach. Some were, however, exposed to Islamic literature that discussed and stressed the close connection between religion and politics. A sizeable number of them were inspired by the Islamic rhetoric and discourse espoused by, among others, the Egyptian *Ikhwan ul-Muslimin*; the ideas of the latter filtered down to the East coast of Africa and travelled to West Africa where they were taken up and disseminated by local Muslim groups and organizations.

On the whole, Muslims in Africa have generally been supportive of democratic structures; this was borne out by an Afro-barometer survey that was conducted during 1999 and 2001 in the following countries: Mali, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda. The survey established that their ideas of a democratic African nation-state did not differ much from those expressed by non-Muslims.⁴⁰ During April 2010 the USA based Pew Forum produced the results of another detailed survey that looked at the notion of tolerance among Muslims and Christians in sub-Saharan Africa.

Notwithstanding these significant surveys, when we review Muslim participation in politics, then we find ample evidence that demonstrate their willingness to cooperate in the democratic structures. After Julius K. Nyerere retired from office as Tanzania's first (Christian) president, he was succeeded Ali Hassan Mwinyi who remained in that position for two terms. And during the latter's term he had 16 Christian and 8 Muslim cabinet ministers. The arrangement in Tanzania has generally been that the Muslims and Christians agreed to share the state's highest office and government positions. At present Jakay Kikwete, a Muslim, enjoys his first five year reign as president; he succeeded Benjamin Mkapa, a Christian, who had been ten years in office.

When we look at the post-Banda period in Malawi, for example, we observe that it was once headed by Bakili Muluzi (1994-2004) who relied on the reading of Islamists' literature for his insights into and understanding of Islam in the 1980s. Since Malawi's Muslims participated in the national elections they naturally voted into parliament a

⁴⁰See Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 3 September 2002.

few of their Muslim representatives as Members of Parliament; according to the present record there are 10 MPs.

In South Africa, where Muslims were permitted to form their political parties such as the Islamic Party and the African Muslim Party, most of the Muslims either voted for the ANC or the Democratic Alliance. When Nelson Mandela was sworn in as the first democratically elected president during May 1994, he appointed Dullah Omar – a Muslim – as the Minister of Justice. And when Thabo Mbeki became president in 2000, Mr. Ebrahim Rasool was appointed the premier of the Western Cape Province and when Mr. Jacob Zuma was voted in during 2009 as the fourth democratically elected president he selected Ms. Naledi Pandor as the Minister of Science and Technology. In addition to these appointments a fair number of Muslims were and are MPs and municipal councillors.

Similar developments of Muslim participation have been witnessed in different parts of the African continent. In Kenya and Tanzania Muslims have been agitating to form political parties, and in Mozambique and Botswana many Muslims have voted for the ruling parties, namely FELIMO and BDP respectively, and smaller numbers have supported the opposition parties. These are clear indications that Muslims in different parts of the continent have actively participated and at least contributed towards the national and local politics. These political initiatives have also been complemented by the formation of strong civil society organizations. These have been active in advocacy against violation of civil liberties and they also act as watchdogs of the governments – criticising, pointing out abuses of power, corruption and highlighting issues that deserve national attention.

These examples show how political and religious power can be fused in individuals and groups. Jeff Haynes⁴¹ noted this occurrence when he studied the developments in sub-Saharan Africa among the plethora of tariqahs that were instrumental in some of the socio-political flares across the continent. He highlighted the status of Sufism in East (and West) African states. This has been observed in Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa. He further pointed out that whilst there are some African Muslims who have been proactive politically, others have been marginalised because of intra-ethnic and regional fragmentation. A few examples in West African states such as Ghana, Ivory Coast, Togo and Benin are referred to. Thus, contemporary Muslim agencies – whether minority or majority have been active in making their presence felt in the socio-political arena on the African continent. This has happened despite sufficient proof that point at efforts to marginalise Muslims in certain parts of the continent because they were being associated with terrorism; a phenomenon that also resulted in the increase of Islamophobia. This phenomenon, however, is not as wide-spread on the continent as compared to the situation in Europe where Muslims have gradual grown numerically as a religious minority.

⁴¹Jeff Haynes, "Religion, Post-Colonial Africa: Islam" in Kevin Shellington (ed.), *Encyclopedia of African History*, New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 3: 2005: 1267-1268.

Cultural Sphere: Islamophobia and Terrorism

When the American embassies were simultaneously bombed in Kenya and Tanzania, Muslims were automatically accused as the 'terrorists' responsible for this dastardly deed⁴². The negative view of Islam and Muslims was further reinforced when they were also found guilty by the USA administration and the liberal Western media of having been involved in the destruction of the New York twin towers during September 2001. Despite the lack of tangible evidence and protests against this allegation, Muslims were unable to shed off this negative image and in the process they have been unable to stop the rise of Islamophobia among non-Muslims.

This was particularly reflected in the popularisation and circulation of the views of Hirsi Ali - the Somalian refugee/Dutch politician/American citizen - who critically responded against Islam and the Muslims (circa 2005) and when the Danish newspaper published a series of cartoons on Prophet Muhammad (circa 2006). Although Hirsi Ali's critical comments drew angry responses, the cartoon debate incensed the Muslim communities in and outside the Muslim heartlands.

Muslims in countries such as Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya vented their anger. Blasphemous series of deaths were reported as a result of the protests in some of these African states. Whilst Islamophobic feelings have been expressed by the Europeans, Africans have not responded to this phenomenon in the same manner. This could be because Muslims have had and continue to have a better relationship with non-Muslim African communities. These communalities have been more accommodating and tolerant of Muslim beliefs and practices; this has been demonstrated quite well by the Pew Forum survey that was mentioned earlier. Indeed the African experience of Islam and Muslims has always been different to that we witnessed in Europe and the USA. In fact, the USA's respective homeland and foreign policies have come under constant criticism because they purportedly targeted Muslims unfairly. And since the USA initiated the 'War-on-Terror' campaign across the globe, Muslims seemed to have remained the focus and this therefore remains one of their major challenges.

Political Sector: The 'War-on-Terror' Campaign

Indeed, since the tragic 9/11 attacks in New York, the 'War-on-Terror' campaign that Muslims encountered in the Muslim heartlands and on West African soil has been of key concern. This crusade, as some describe it, was started by the George W Bush administration and continued by the Barak administration. The responsibility for simultaneous 1998 USA embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, which we touched upon earlier, implicated Muslims.

Thus, the 9/11 tragedy only helped to put Muslims under the world spotlight once more. This thus triggered suspicion that Al-Qaeda, the organization that was established and led by Osama bin Laden who was charged for having been behind the 9/11 event, was using vulnerable Africa's porous borders as a spring board to target and

⁴²Consult Bjorn Moller's Danish report titled *Religion and Conflict in Africa* with special focus on East Africa. Copenhagen: DIIS, 2006.

attack structures and installations that belong to the USA and its allies. As a matter of interest, when the South Africans were preparing for the FIFA World Cup, many spurious reports were circulating about pending attacks by affiliates or members this organization.

Because of these developments, USA demanded that African states be wary of fundamentalists, extremists and terrorists using the inhospitable African terrain as outposts and hideouts.⁴³ The USA also requested African states to set up a special African Centre for the Study of Research on Terrorism. This centre was eventually set up in Algeria.

Alongside these special requests, the USA demanded that African nation-states formulate anti-terror laws that would impede any group from using Africa as a viable base. It also mooted for the formation of an African Command. This Command would assist in pursuing and implementing – on behalf of the USA – ‘War on Terror’ policies throughout the African continent. Apart from dictating policy in Africa, the USA has also been demanding that African states observe and implement democratic norms of governance to ensure ‘good governance and accountability.’

Health Care Arena: The HIV and Aids Pandemic

Apart from the above list of ongoing challenges, there is one other insurmountable challenge: it is the spread and impact of the HIV and Aids. Although African communities have had to encounter malaria and other diseases, HIV and Aids has been a disease that continues to ravage many parts of the continent.

Uganda, for example, has been one of the East African states that have been affected by this pandemic. Religious organisations such as the Islamic Medical Association (IMA) have been in the vanguard of warding off its spread. The efforts of the IMA and other non-governmental organisations have been hailed as examples of the best practice in the health care sector⁴⁴. Similar efforts have been made by Muslim organizations such as Positive Muslims to deal with the scourge in South Africa.

⁴³Consult the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* Vol. 25 no. 1, 2007. Apart from that issue also consult articles that appear occasionally in *Review of African Political Economy*. See Jeremy Keenan's ‘The Banana Theory of Terrorism: Alternative Truths and the Collapse of the ‘Second’ (Saharan) Front in the War on Terror’. In *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25(1): 31–58, 2007; Baz Lecocq & Paul Schrijver's ‘The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes and Pitfalls on the Saharan Front.’ In *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 25(1): 141–166, 2007; E. Ann McDougall's ‘Constructing Emptiness: Islam, Violence and Terror in the Historical Making of the Sahara.’ In *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25(1): 17–30, 2007. Also see Muhammed Haron's ‘Fundamentalism and Terrorism: Reviewing and Locating African and South African Muslims in the Texts.’ Unpublished International Peace University of South Africa One Day Symposium ‘Dissecting Muslim Extremism,’ Cape Town on 18th October 2009.

⁴⁴See Farid Esack & Sarah Chiddy edited text: *Islam and AIDS: Between Scorn, Pity and Justice* (ed.). Oxford: Oneworld, 2009.

The many challenges that have accompanied the process of globalization have continued unabated. Africa's Muslims, though they experienced some success at particular levels, they have not managed to overcome them. As a disparate society across the continent, they need to devise ways of dealing with the mentioned and other catalogued challenges.

Round Up

In this Chapter an attempt was made to provide an overview of the status of Muslims and development relating to Islam in Africa. This was an ambitious task that was fraught with problems since no-one is able to deal with the various issues in a short essay such as this even-handedly; in fact, it is inevitable that this essay overlooked some important developments and inadvertently misinterpreted others. Nonetheless, the Chapter may not by all means comprehensively and accurately offer a scholarly assessment of the 20th century.

Be that as it may, the Chapter in a broader context attempts to narrate the experiences of African (and Arab) Muslims. This socio-historical background is important when attempting to appreciate the challenges that Muslims faced throughout and after colonial rule.

The section on the agents of change over the centuries provided an insight into the nature of agents during the 20th century. The agents have initiated changes under circumstances that have been very difficult. Despite difficulties in many cases, they assisted to a great extent in radically transforming the socio-political conditions.

The conditions Muslims faced in the 20th century were markedly different from those the 19th century. This is noted in West and North Africa respectively. In these regions, we see the extent to which West and North African Muslims struggled to fight, to defend and to maintain their religious identity. However, in the post-Cold War era, Muslims have had to re-look at the manner they have practiced their faith. Since religion and culture are interrelated, no distinction is made between cultural practices and religious beliefs. Neither do they distinguish between religion and politics. We see that as far as they were and are concerned, there is no distinction or contradiction.

Bearing these points in mind and by way of rounding up this essay, we wish to catalogue a few issues that Muslims will have to address in order to reduce the Islamophobia, which persists in the minds of non-Muslims, and to bring an end to extremism that has developed into forms of terrorism so that others may have a better understanding and appreciation of Muslims. We begin by commenting on the dress code and end with brief remarks about the media.

Dress Code

According to Sharia, Muslim males and females have been required to dress modestly; by this is basically meant that they have to dress in such a manner that their clothes are not revealing such as a see-through pants or shirt in the case of a man and a mini-skirt in the case of the woman. The clothes should also not be tight-fitting to such a degree that it exposes one's private parts. Communities in Egypt don slightly differently from

those in South Africa. For them, the veil is a cultural practice borrowed from Saudi Arabia. Although young Muslim women consider the veil as a fashion statement, feminists in European states think it is oppressive. They have also argued that the lifestyles followed by Muslims on the whole are archaic and not in line with democratic principles. As a consequence of their firm decisions the French and Belgians decided to outlaw the burqah (veiling) and impose a fine if anyone is found wearing the veil. Instead of working towards rapprochement, these legal rulings have led to more distrust between the European non-Muslim ways of thinking and the European Muslim citizens. Fortunately, these have not affected the attitudes of non-Muslims in Africa.

Democracy and Democratic Values

In addition to these negative perceptions regarding Muslim dress code, criticisms have also been levelled against Muslim communities for not espousing democratic values. In defence, some African Muslims cite the Quran as the repository of divinely ordained democratic values. Just like their counterparts in Muslims heartlands, they argue that some of the democratic values advocated by the west are on the contrary set by human beings. These conservative Muslims represented by mainly by the Muslim theologians also dispute the issues pertaining to human rights. The 2002 Afro-barometer survey, however, suggested that despite the dispute of certain western values such as homosexuality that form a central part of the democratic state, African Muslims have been in favour of democracy.

Education

The west also argues that Muslim educational institutions produce fundamentalists and are breeding grounds for terrorism. It has been advocating a radical overhaul of the systems. Despite this faulty argument, western philanthropic foundations continue to invest in research projects that study these educational institutions. One of the sponsors is the Ford Foundation. The overall aim is to find acceptable ways of bringing about change. For example, in South Africa, Islamic theological institutions have been asked to comply with certain regulations. These regulations were set by the South African Qualifications Bureau which is aligned to the Ministry of Basic Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. Even though this is an isolated case, other nation-states might take the cue as a way of monitoring and controlling Muslim educational institutions.

Banking

Of late, many Muslim economic institutions such as Al-Baraka Bank and Islamic Banks have been established in Africa. These institutions have, however, been made to comply with state regulations regarding banking. Another development in this sector has been that many non-Muslims Banks such as Stanbic and Standard Bank, which have branches in many parts of Africa, have devised Sharia compliant products with the intention of wooing Muslim and non-Muslim clients. In fact, the success of these types of institutions has attracted a great deal of interest among economists during the recession period of 2008 and 2009.

Media

Unlike the Muslim economic institutions, the Muslim media have readily complied with state broadcasting laws in African states. The Muslim media, though not well established in many African countries, have been conscious of the fact that they operate in multi-religious and multi-cultural societies and have to reach out to all – not just their fellow religionists. Many African countries have enshrined religious pluralism in their constitutions. In effect, African communities are tolerant and uphold the constitutions; this was once again confirmed by the Pew Forum's April 2010 survey. The Muslim media stakeholders have, however, realized that they have an important role to play in mediating and disseminating information about Islam and Muslims without causing unnecessary tension and friction. The position the Muslim media have alongside the secular media is one that they should cherish and employ in the interest of the Muslims in particular and the society – where they operate and function – in general.

Conclusion

African Muslims face many challenges in different ways and in many sectors. The dilemma brought by the challenges raises very many questions. For example, should Muslims deal with members of other religious traditions? How do they respond to Muslims accused of apostasy? How can they observe Islamic law when it clashes with the secular law of the state? Do the Muslim NGOs address the needs of the whole society? Should the NGOs proselytize instead of extending welfare assistance?⁴⁵ What about gender relations in the public sphere? What role do modern sufi networks play in reflecting alternative Muslim identities in Africa?⁴⁶ Does Islam accept the contributions of Muslim musicians such as Salif Keita, Baaba Maal and Abdullah Ibrahim and Muslim artists such as Yusuf Grillo to the formation of a viable Muslim identity on the African continent? If so, how are they accommodated by the conservative Muslims theologians who seem to pronounce on individuals who have carved out a profession for themselves in these areas?

These are just some of the many questions and challenges that Africa's growing Muslim population faces. The solution lies in how they will adapt themselves for change in this era of modernisation, on the one hand, and globalisation, on the other. Expressions of Muslim identity by and large is dynamic and always in the process of developing and transforming. On the African continent, the evidence of the transformation of Africa's growing Muslim population has been witnessed in all parts of the continent.

Taking into account the vibrant manner in which African Muslims have expressed their identity over the centuries and particularly throughout the 20th century, we assume - and we hope - that they will collectively play a very meaningful and positive role in this era of globalization by contributing effectively towards the African Renais-

⁴⁵Look at Holger Weiss (ed). *Social Welfare in Muslim Societies in Africa*. Stockholm: Nordic Institute 2002.

⁴⁶See Vikor 2000, Westerlund & Rasander 1997.

sance project as well as other initiatives to transform the continent into a progressive one. And for them to play this significant role will, of course, depend upon how they understand and express their beliefs and practices as African Muslims and more importantly how they relate to and cooperate with their fellow citizens to ultimately achieve the noble goals of a fully developed African continent.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hinduism and Buddhism: An Introduction¹

Garth Mason

Over one billion people throughout the world follow the religions of Hinduism and Buddhism.² This is significant for scholars of religion because a large percentage of the world's population considers the views of these two Asian religions as true; therefore scholars of religion need to take note of what Hindus and Buddhists believe and how they practise their respective religions. Studying any religion, and Hinduism and Buddhism is no exception, requires a marriage of intellect and emotion. The result of an investigation that combines heart and head is often a gentle discovery. In the study of Hinduism and Buddhism the message unearthed is that there is incredible beauty in these religions. So although our study of Hinduism and Buddhism will be informative, like the study of any religion it will evoke an aesthetic response. The religions from different world cultures have much beauty to share with the world and sensitive scholars of Hinduism and Buddhism are able to describe the inherent beauty of these religions in language that resonates with both emotion and reason.

¹The editors wish to acknowledge Professor Muhammed Haron's (University of Botswana) assistance in providing the references for this chapter.

²Among the many works that have been written on these two significant Eastern Religious Traditions, we recommend the following for further reading: Lipner, J. *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 3rd ed. London & New York: Routledge, 1999; Flood, G. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; Nadkarni, M.V. *Hinduism: A Gandhian Perspective*. New Delhi: Ane Books India, 2006; Klostermaier, K. K. *A Survey of Hinduism*. New York State: University of New York, 2007; Brockington, L. *The Sacred Thread: Hinduism in its Continuity and Diversity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981; Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, History and Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Prebish, C. S. & D. Keown. *Introducing Buddhism*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006; Basham, A. L. *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989; Dasgupta, S. *A History of Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992; Kruger, J. S. *Buddhism: From Buddha to Asoka*, Pretoria: UNISA Press, 1995; Rodrigues, H. *Introduction to Hinduism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006; Robinson, R. H. & L. Johnson. *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, 4th ed. New York: Wadsworth, 1997; Watts, Alan W. *The Way of Zen*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1957 and Strong, J. S. *The Buddha: A Short Biography*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2002.

As scholars of religion, we must allow the visual, conceptual, emotional and psychological aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism to engage with our imagination because these two religions flow easily between the timeless and time, and between past, present and future. When scholars look at these two eastern religions they need to be aware that the world views expressed are interwoven very subtly into believers' minds. These world views provide balance and symmetry to followers' perspectives. At times, if scholars come from different cultures or world views, the beliefs of Hindus and Buddhists may appear strange, but patience is required, along with an open-minded approach, in studying these religions. Hinduism and Buddhism have their own internal patterns and rhythms. They can be very subtle and can change over time and as they move from one culture to another. The capacity to see these subtle variations is totally dependent on the attentiveness and sensitivity of the scholar.

The study of Hinduism and Buddhism is an adventure. It is a journey that can have its beginning from where we are now in Southern Africa, but it is a journey that has no specific destination. In fact, having once embarked on the journey into studying Hinduism and Buddhism, one embraces the voyage and its continuity. It is a journey that opens the scholar up to possibilities. The qualities we need on this journey are patience, awareness, openness, and an acceptance of just listening and not of imposing one's own views.

So let us begin the expedition from our own Southern Africa shores. South Africa has the privilege of having provided the setting for the development of modern eastern religion, particularly Hinduism. One of the greatest Hindu reformers of modern Hinduism was Mohandas K. Gandhi.³ He lived in Durban, South Africa, from 1893 to 1915. During that time he practised law, participated peacefully in the South African War as a stretcher bearer and was very involved in campaigns for human rights in the country. In South Africa Gandhi developed his philosophy and his approach to political resistance, called *satyagrâha* (holding on to truth).⁴ *Satyagrâha* is a political approach to protest and social injustice that focuses on truth rather than resisting evil. Gandhi believed that treating all people with the same respect and dignity would ultimately weaken evil to the extent that it would eventually collapse under its own weight.

Gandhi was persuaded by Indians living in Natal to stay in South Africa to campaign against racial discrimination. In 1894, he was fairly successful in fighting the

³Consult Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi: a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001; Dietmar Rothermund, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Essay in Political Biography*. Delhi: Motilal Books, 1998; Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, and Glyn Richards, *The Philosophy of Gandhi: a study of his basic ideas*. London: Curzon Press, 1982.

⁴Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)*. New York: Schocken, 1951 and read Eric Itzkin, *Gandhi's Johannesburg: Birthplace of Satyagraha*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2000).

proposed Indian Franchise Bill, which would have removed Indian voting rights in Natal. His campaign succeeded in lessening the severity of the proposed legislation. He also founded the Natal Indian Congress. In 1907, when the Transvaal legislature passed a law requiring all Indians to register with the authorities and to be finger printed, Gandhi implemented *satyagrāha* for the first time. Gandhi and fellow protesters peacefully picketed at registration centres, and accepted with dignity the violence meted out to them by police. This protest was followed by further successful protests, using *satyagrāha*, concerning poll tax, immigration regulations, indentured labour and recognition of Indian marriages. Did Gandhi realize at this early stage that he was laying the seeds for the peaceful liberation of India from Colonial rule in 1947?

Many of Gandhi's beliefs, contained in *satyagrāha*, date back to the earliest beginnings of eastern religions: beliefs such as *dharma* (universal law), *moksha* (spiritual release) and *samsara* (transmigration).⁵ These three ideas are important to both Hinduism and Buddhism:

Dharma: In the early religious practices in India (about 1500 BCE), *karma* or action was related to sacrifices which, if performed correctly, it was believed produced good effects. Correctly performed sacrifices led to the idea of a cosmic order called *Rta*. The idea of cosmic order was later called *dharma* in Indian thought. The Law of *Karma* was the recognition that actions, both individual and social, needed to be in accordance with *dharma*. (For Gandhi, society needed to be structured on just grounds in order to be in alignment with *dharma*. Likewise, protests against injustice also needed to be in accordance with *dharma*).

Moksha: A little later in India, at about 700 BCE, the idea of emancipation or *moksha* was seen to be the single goal of humanity. *Moksha* is the release from entrapment by the illusory world of suffering. *Moksha* occurs when the Truth of the individual's nature is experienced beyond the sensory world. (According to Gandhi, evil in society was caused by greed. Freedom was reached when citizens identified with the community and not with selfish concerns).

Samsāra (direct translation: to wander): is translated in English as the cycle of rebirth, which implies that the soul continually enters different bodies, going through a continuous cyclical process of birth, decay, death and birth again. *Samsāra* refers to worldly existence and the apparent experiences of the soul (*jīva*) in this illusionary state. As the soul migrates from body to body it carries with it *karma* from previous lives that will affect the present life. *Samsāra* is tied to the idea of *avidyā*, or ignorance, in that *avidyā* prevents people from identifying with the universal soul (*Brahman*). It is *avidyā* therefore that leads ignorant souls back to the cycle of rebirth. (For

⁵C. S. Prebish and D. Keown, *Introducing Buddhism...*, 'Dharma', Ch. 3, 54-59; G. Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*.

Gandhi, human beings had their own psychological conditions that he called *swabhāva*, which determined personal tendencies. Gandhi believed that the source of *swabhāva* was a product of their previous lives. He therefore believed that all people should be free to find their own liberation and not be limited by religion or state).

Although these three ideas are common to both Hinduism and Buddhism, they are interpreted differently in each religion. We will explore these differences later, but for now we need to appreciate that the germ of these ideas is the same for both religions. This is one of the skills of studying religions: being able to see similar roots in different religions despite the fact that they grow differently within the various religions.

While Hinduism and Buddhism are separate religions, they cannot be studied separately. Both have their beginnings in the Asian sub-continent and emerged from the same original proto-Hindu culture. The word Hindu comes from the early Persians who named the river that flowed from the Himalayas to where the civilization thrived on its banks, Sindhu. Persian immigrants referred to the people living on the banks of the river as Hindus. The earliest beliefs in Indian culture began with these people, who lived between 3500 and 4000 years ago.

The Beginnings (Vedic Culture)

Hinduism began around 2500—1700 BCE in the Indus Valley civilization, but we know very little about this culture, its beliefs or practices. Scholars' only knowledge comes from excavations on the sites of two prominent cities of that era at *Harappa* and *Mohenjadaro*, but sadly they left no literature. Scholars have far more knowledge of the subsequent period in Hinduism's development. This period began between 1700 and 1500 BCE, when waves of *Aryans* migrated into the North-west of India. *Aryans* were fair-skinned people who, it is thought, arrived in the Indus Valley region from Central Asia. They largely imposed their culture and gods on the original Indus Valley inhabitants and used them in their sacrificial practices.⁶ These gods were symbolic of natural forces in the heavens, the air and earth.

Some of these gods include:

Varuna – the god of sky

Indra – the god of war and thunder

Surya – the sun god

Rudra – storm deity

Yama – the god of death

Agni – the god of fire and sacrifice, and

Soma – the divine presence in the juice of the some plant

Although it may seem that early Hinduism was polytheistic, its world view was more complex than that. *Rig-Veda* 1.164.46 reads, "They call it *Mitra*, *Varuna*, *Agni*. The

⁶G. Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 30-36.

real is one, though wise men give it different names.” This statement seems to imply that these people believed that in some way these forces were all expressions of one unified power.

The *Aryans* developed two categories of scriptures in which they wrote about their gods, *Shruti* and *Smriti*. *Shruti* means “what is heard” and is the authority for Hindu beliefs. Of secondary importance, but of great influence on Hindus, is *Shruti* or “what is remembered”.⁷ Unfortunately, in establishing their own literature, the *Aryans* destroyed much of the way of life of the original people of north India.

The *Shruti* were composed by great spiritual seers between 1500 and 300 BCE. These seers transmitted their knowledge, mostly orally, from father to son and teacher to student. *Shruti* texts are comprised of four Vedas, namely:

Rig-Veda

Yajur-Veda

Sama-Veda

Atharva-Veda

Each of the four *Vedas* developed along the same stages, namely: Hymns or *Samhita*.

Explanations of Mantras and Rituals or *Brahmanas*

Aranyakas or Forest Books (This marks a period in India when people began leaving society and exploring inner spirituality in the surrounding forests).

Upanishads or mystical utterances of profound truths. These were the records of great gurus who taught students in the forests of Northern India. The word *Upanishad* literally means to ‘sit in front of a teacher’.

Smriti are derived from *Shruti*. Though they are also based on revelation they are recognized to be of human origin. *Smriti* are comprised of:

The *Dharma-shastra* (codes of Law)

The *Itihasas* (epics) including the Mahabharata and the Ramayana

The *Puranas* (legends)

The *Darshanas* (philosophical texts)

During the Vedic period (1500 – 700 BCE), priests (*Brahmin*) had become very powerful and became protective of their positions of power in society, defining classes

⁷J. Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. ‘The Voice of the Scripture as Vedas’, Part 1, Ch. 2, 25-54 and Ch. 3, 55-73; M. Witzel, ‘Vedas and Upanishads’, Ch. 3, 68-75 and F. Matchett, ‘The Puranas’, Ch. 6, 129-143, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. G. Flood (London: Blackwell, 2005); and G. Flood, 1996, 109-113.

according to descending levels of purity – priests being the most pure. Vedic society was divided into four social classes or *varna*⁸ (and still is today in India):

Brahmin (Priests)

Kshatriyas (soldiers, administrators and rulers)

Vaishyas (subsistence farmers and merchants)

Shudras (manual workers)

It is worth noting that these categories were not rigidly adhered to in the early phases of Vedic culture, but later on these categories became more fixed, and lower groups were more oppressed by the priestly class. A fifth class developed over time, at about 1000 BCE, who performed the ‘impure functions’ in society such as cleaning sewage. They were known as *chândalas*, ‘dog-cookers’ or untouchables.

Remnants of Vedic culture are still apparent in modern Indian society. Mahatma Gandhi was obviously worried by the continuance of social injustice in Indian society. Together with tribal people, the lowest rung in Hindu society still exists and makes up one-fifth of contemporary Indian society. Despite legislation in 1955 to protect abuse of the poor, called ‘The Untouchables Offences Act’, discrimination still exists in India society. Gandhi renamed them *Harijans* or ‘children of God’. In contemporary times, this group of oppressed people prefers to be called *dalits*, meaning depressed.

But while Gandhi associated *dharma* with maintaining social justice, in the Brahmanic dominated society of 1000 – 300 BCE, maintaining social classes was the dharmic activity. All actions were seen as duties or sacrifices to maintain order in society and the alignment of cosmic order. (This idea relates back to the Aryan notion of *Rta* or cosmic order). The cosmic law or *dharma* had a social and personal aspect. Every member of society had social duties, assigned according to birth class (*jāti*). In addition, Vedic culture extended duty to the changing stages in the personal lives of Hindus known as *âurama*. The stages of life are divided into four:

Student (*brahmacarya*) – a young man learns the essential spiritual precepts for the life of future teaching.

Householder (*grhastha*) – A man gets married, raises a family with his wife in order to contribute to the development of society.

Gradual withdrawal (*vânaprastha*) – A man, sometimes with his wife, recedes from society, giving way for their children to explore their new social roles as young adults.

Total withdrawal (*samnyâsa*) – Old men remove themselves from society and take up lives as renunciators, renouncing all social roles, even, sometimes, their names. This last stage is focused purely on realising *moksha*.

⁸M. V. Nadkarni, *Hinduism*: ..., ‘Is Caste System intrinsic to Hinduism?’, Ch. 2, 77-130; K. K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, ‘The Hindu Social Order’, Part III, Ch. 20, pp263-282; and J. Lipner, *Hindus*: ..., ‘The Voice of Tradition: Caste and Narrative’, Part I, Ch. 6, 108-145.

The Upanishadic Period

The dominance of Brahmanism during the Vedic period weakened between 700 and 300 BCE. People not of the priestly class began to feel that they could discover inner spirituality without depending on the sacrificial rituals of priests. This period coincided with the development of the *Upanishads* as people left their positions in society and went to study with teachers in the forests. Later we will see that the birth of Buddhism also occurred during this period.

The *Upanishads* form a very important phase in the development of Hinduism. This phase is often referred to as *Vedānta* or the ‘end of the Veda’, implying that the *Upanishads* mark the completion and perfection of Vedic knowledge. The *Upanishads* also signal the move away from ritualism in Hindu religious practice and the further development of *yoga* or inner spirituality, where the mind is trained to reach profound levels of stillness. Scholars think that *yoga* predates *Aryan* religion in India and was practised by the original inhabitants of the Indus Valley.⁹

Vedānta was formed around the realization that the universal spirit or intelligence is identical to the spirit that inheres within the individual. *Vedānta* makes the pronouncement that *Brahman* or world soul is *Atman* or individual soul. During this period the term Self started being used to incorporate the world of nature, individual experience and gods. The realization that *Atman* is *Brahman* is a very important moment not only in the evolution of Hinduism but also in the religious thinking of humanity. We will return to Hindu philosophy a little later on.

The Epic Era

At around the same time as the Upanishadic phase, the Epic era also emerged between 500 BCE to 300 CE. The confluence of the *Upanishads* and the Epics heralds the beginning of what is known as Hinduism today. In this phase two gods, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*, rise to prominence and become the focus of cultic worship. The devotional worship (*bhakti*) of these two gods is important because the high philosophy in the *Upanishads* thereby became more accessible to village dwellers. *Shiva* and *Vishnu* worship centred around shrines in nature or in the household. Occasion pilgrimages were also made to major *Shiva* or *Vishnu* temples. The worship of these two gods involved a process called *darshana* or ‘seeing’ the deity, which can best be described as identifying with the God’s qualities. But it is important to remember that whether one is a devotee of *Vishnu* or *Shiva*, the common understanding was that these two gods were expressions of *Brahman*. *Vishnu* and *Shiva* enabled the very abstract idea of *Brahman* to be worshipped intimately.

A third god also rose to some prominence in this era, *Brahma* (not to be confused with *Brahman* or *Brahmin*).¹⁰ *Shiva*, *Vishnu* and *Brahma* form what is known as the trimurti. In this formulation each of the three gods represented different phases in the universe:

⁹M. V. Nadkarni, *Hinduism: ...*, ‘The Dynamics of Hinduism?’ Ch. 4, 169-171.

¹⁰K. K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, ‘Brahma’, Part II, Ch. 12, 166-172.

Creation – *Brahma*

Sustenance – *Vishnu*

Destruction – *Shiva*

While the trimurti form has survived until today, the god *Brahma* has not become a popular god for devotees. Two Epic tales were written during this period, The *Mahabharata* and The *Ramayana*.¹¹ Both epics have *Vishnu* as the protagonist but in different forms or incarnations. In Hindu mythology, *Vishnu* reveals himself as an *avatar* to creation to give specific teachings needed for that stage of creation. *Vishnu* has had nine previous avatar roles and the world is awaiting the tenth and last incarnation of *Vishnu* as *Kalki*. The *Mahabharata* and The *Ramayana* describe two of *Vishnu*'s incarnations as *Krishna* in the *Mahabharata* and King *Rama* in The *Ramayana*.

Briefly, the most important section of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which comprises only eighteen chapters. It recounts a profound conversation between the skilled archer, *Arjuna*, and his charioteer, *Krishna*, during a battle. *Arjuna* questions *Krishna* about truth, morality and duty and *Krishna* answers him while the battle dramatically continues around them. The essence of *Krishna*'s message is that death is an illusion and ignorance keeps humans in a seeming state of suffering. Release or *moksha* from ignorance is attained through *yoga*. *Yoga* can be practised in three different ways, depending on temperament:

Devotion (*bhakti*)

Action (*karma*)

Knowledge (*jnana*)

The *Ramayana* tells the story of the relationship between King *Rama* and his wife *Sita*. Central to the drama is the abduction of *Sita* by the demonic king of the south, *Ravana*. *Rama* and various helpers, including his brother *Lakshmana* and the monkey king *Hanuman*, rescue her and they attempt to re-establish their life together. The story deals with the difficult issue of living a life of duty prescribed by *dharma* in addition to complexities of human relationships, particularly in marriage.

The Philosophical Period¹²

The *Upanishads* and the Epics depict a growing refinement of the idea of deity in India. Vedic hymns tended to root gods in natural forces and processes. But by the 5th century BCE the idea of a universal infinite intelligence, called *Brahman*, that pervaded the universe, gained currency amongst gurus. *Brahman* became a complex notion in that it was experienced in the world and yet was also the Absolute Reality beyond sensory experience.

¹¹Flood, G 1996, 107-109.

¹²Flood, G 1996, 'The Hindu Theology & Philosophy', Ch. 10, 224-249.

One of India's most brilliant philosophers, *Shankara*, (8th Century CE) who founded *Advaita Vedānta* (the absolute non-dualism school of Hindu philosopher), maintained that *Brahman* had two aspects, *Saguna*, and *Nirguna*. Absolute Brahman or *Nirguna* cannot be conceptualized. *Brahman* is all there is – it cannot be separated or divided into attributes. The appearance of separation is due to *Mâyâ* or ignorance (*avidyā*).

But how can absolute reality *Brahman* co-exist with ignorance? According to *Shankara*, *Mâyâ* is not different from *Brahman*. *Mâyâ* emerges from *Brahman* to create a world of apparent separation. When *Brahman* is conceived in this created world *Shankara* calls this *Saguna*. According to *Shankara*, *Saguna* is important because it is the object of religious devotion. *Saguna*, who is also called *Ishvara*, enables those under the sway of ignorance to experience their true nature in *Brahman*.

Festivals and Rituals¹³

At this point we will turn our attention to how the normal passages of life are observed in Hinduism.

Marriage: While marriage is clearly a social practice—providing perpetuity for society through children created through the union of husband and wife—it is also seen as a very spiritual institution. Lessons learnt in marriage, of sacrifice and deepening love of divinity within the spouse, lead ultimately to *moksha*. Marriage in Hinduism is a family affair where parents, in consultation with an astrologer, find the right partners and the most auspicious time and day for the ceremony.

A significant part of the actual marriage ceremony is the taking of seven steps by the bride and groom together around a sacrificial fire that purifies and offers wisdom to the couple. The seven steps are symbolic of food, strength, wealth, good fortune, children, longevity of marital relations, and lasting friendship. The marriage ends with prayers and a sumptuous feast provided by the family.

Birth: The married couple will then consult a priest who, by way of astrology, will inform them about the most promising time for conception. Once the child is born the priest then provides an astrological chart for the newly-born person's life. Just over a week after the birth the priest performs a name-giving ceremony including prayers of blessing. For this ritual the baby's hair is shaven off to denote purification.

Funeral Rites: Finally, death in Hinduism is ritualized in the form of the body being cremated. Men wear white clothing at the funeral and white flowers adorn the ceremony. The funeral is very simple because death is an illusion (the soul is immortal). The funeral pyre is lit by the nearest male relation and ghee (clarified butter) is thrown onto the pyre. After the cremation the ashes should be scattered into a river, if not the Ganges then a river that is representative of the Ganges.

¹³Flood, G. 1996, 'Ritual', Ch. 9, 198-223; H. Rodrigues, *Introduction to Hinduism*, 'Hindu Art and Worship Ritual', Ch. 11, 222-248.

Festivals: While life in Hinduism is seen to be characterized by ignorance and death, Hinduism makes time for festivals and celebrations. Indeed, Hinduism has more festivals than any other religion. Festivals are calculated according to lunar and solar cycles which date back to Vedic beliefs.

The most well known Hindu festival is Deepavali/Divali (the row of lights). It is celebrated annually between September and October (incorporating the new moon in October). Gujarati-speaking Hindus celebrate New Year's Day on the day following Divali. Divali is celebrated by lighting lamps to indicate that amidst darkness and ignorance a pathway of lit lamps shows the way to God. In the evening, Lakshmi, Vishnu's wife, is worshipped for wealth and prosperity.

There are three other important festivals in the Hindu calendar:

Holi

Krishna Janmashtami

Navaratri

Holi takes place in February or March. In north India it normally starts during the full moon coinciding with the spring harvest. Throughout India the festival is celebrated by building a bonfire and ignoring the social categorizing of peoples into different classes. Holi signifies the overcoming of evil by good and the bonfire is believed to destroy the demoness Holika.

Krishna Janmashtami commemorates the incarnation of Vishnu as Lord Krishna. This festival takes place during the waning of the moon in August or September. The festival is celebrated by reciting the narrative of Krishna's birth and youth.

Navaratri, or the festival of nine nights, is celebrated in September-October. It is focused on the worship of the Divine Mother. The first three nights are spent worshipping the goddess *Kali* (goddess of destroyer of ignorance). The next three nights are dedicated to the worship of *Lakshmi* (the goddess of material and spiritual well being). During the last three nights the goddess *Saraswati* is worshipped. *Saraswati* is the goddess of art and poetry. The tenth night is termed *Vijaya Dasmī*, meaning the Day of Victory, signifying the day of victory of good over evil.

Buddhism: Early Development¹⁴

Let us return to our journey. Buddhism grew out of the culture of India. In many ways its world view is born out of Hinduism, but later Hindu developments were also influenced by Buddhism (for example in Shankara's philosophy). Whereas Hinduism has no specific founder, Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, Gautama being his

¹⁴R. H. Robinson & L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion...*, Ch. 1, 7-29; Alan W. Watts, 'The Origin of Buddhism,' in *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), Part 1, Ch. 2, 49-76; P. Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and J. S Strong, *The Buddha: A Short Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 1-10.

clan name. However, to his followers he is known as “the *Buddha*,” meaning “the awakened one.” He was born around 566 BCE, and died around 486 BCE.

Siddhartha was born in northern India, in the town of Kapilavastu in the province of Magadha. His father was chief of the Sakya clan. He dearly wanted his newborn son to one day become emperor of India. In order to ensure that his son remained on a political path, he concealed Siddhartha from the harshness of life that could cause him to seek answers for suffering in religion. Despite all his father’s efforts, Siddhartha renounced his life of luxury to seek deeper answers to life’s problems.

According to Buddhist legend, Siddhartha saw four sights that convinced him he should embark on a spiritual life. The first was seeing an old man. The second was a very sick man. A third was witnessing a corpse. These sightings shocked the young Siddhartha at the cruelties of life. Finally, Siddhartha saw an ascetic with a calm air about him. This sight led Siddhartha to follow a spiritual life which would lead him to freedom from the sufferings of life.

So, at 29 years of age, Siddhartha left his palace at night, shaved off his hair and beard, put on rags and followed other ascetics to the forests to find enlightenment. We referred earlier to the forest dwellers and the Upanishadic period when people left society to pursue spiritual lives in the forests; Siddhartha was following one of the cultural trends in India at that time.

Buddhist narratives describe how Siddhartha tried for six years to find the meaning behind his experiences as an ascetic. During that time he had some teachers but he soon learnt everything they had to teach him (they were *Alara Kalama* and *Uddaka Ramaputta*). His attempts to find enlightenment grew more strenuous as the years went by. Eventually, Siddhartha was close to death and he decided to save his life by taking some food and water, and to follow the life of a beggar. As a result he was shunned by his fellow ascetics.

But his determination to find release from suffering did not cease. Seating himself at the foot of a fig tree (later called the *bodhi*-tree – tree of enlightenment), he vowed he would not leave the shade of the tree until he had found enlightenment. One night of a full moon in May (Wesak) he attained *nirvana*. After realizing his enlightenment he became known as the *Buddha*. Much like the story of Jesus’ temptations in the desert, the Buddha also had to overcome temptations by Mara (the Evil One) before eventually reaching enlightenment.

After realizing *nirvana*, the *Buddha* found the ascetics that had previously spurned him in the Deer Park in Benares. Initially they laughed at him, but sensing a deep calmness radiating from him, their interest in him grew. The *Buddha* answered their curiosity by delivering to them his first sermon. The *Buddha* explained that between a life of self-punishment and a life of self-indulgence was the middle path which leads to release from anguish and wisdom. The ascetics were convinced by his message and became the first members of the Buddhist community, called the *sangha*.

Following his first sermon, the *Buddha* continued to deliver sermons and travel throughout north-eastern India for the next forty-five years. During this period the *Buddha* gathered a fairly large following. He died at the age of eighty, due to eating food that had become rotten, unintentionally served to him by a follower. At his death

he passed into *parinirvana* or full enlightenment. Significantly, the *Buddha* did not appoint a successor to take on the leadership of the *sangha*. The reason for this can only be explained with reference to his spiritual philosophy.

Early Buddhist Teachings¹⁵

The last words of the *Buddha* on his death bed were, “Impermanent are all things.” That statement encapsulated all his teachings, delivered over a period of forty-five years. There is a beautiful symmetry to his life as a teacher because his first sermon echoed his last earthly words. The content of the sermon in the Deer Park was concerned with describing the human condition and offering a way of release from this state. Like any good teacher, his lesson was well-structured and focused on issues that the students would understand. His sermon had four parts, carefully describing his students’ unpleasant experiences, explaining the cause of those experiences, affirming the availability of a cure and finally discussing in detail the way to wellness.

Part One – The First Noble Truth

Human existence is described by the *Buddha* as being deeply unhappy (*dukkha*). The *Buddha* asserted that despite the fact that life is sometimes pleasant, ultimately all happiness is resolved in sadness. For this reason, the *Buddha* said that experience in life is fundamentally unsatisfactory. As earlier noted, the ancient idea *samsāra* also establishes the world as fundamentally characterized by sadness. The *Buddha* incorporated *samāsara* into his spiritual philosophy, but adapted it to his own world view.

Part Two – The Second

The cause of human suffering is craving (*tanha*) for things (ideas, qualities and objects) that might act as substitutes for the reality of existence i.e. *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness). These substitutes could be objects which promise sensory gratification, or the idea of the promise of eternal life.

It is interesting to note that at the time of the *Buddha*, different philosophical schools were asking the same questions about human existence and proposing their own solutions. For example, the *Cārvāka* School taught that humans should enjoy life as there is no after-life. The diametric opposite of *Cārvāka* was the *Jain* School, whose adherents believed in absolute non-violence leading to self-inflicted starvation to ensure the adherent did not participate in the killing of any living thing.

Part Three – The Third Noble Truth

The cure for *dukkha* is letting go. According to the *Buddha*, suffering disappears simultaneously as craving stops. The key to this noble truth is therefore cessation (*nirodha*).

¹⁵C. S. Prebish & D. Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, ‘Dharma’, Ch. 3, 43-53.

Part Four – The Fourth Noble Truth: the Eightfold Path

The eightfold path is a path, but it is not to be imposed on activity. The *Buddha* is putting forward a way of life that is intuitively known when people begin to experience truth. As a way of approaching truth, the eightfold path puts the adherent on the right path to *nirvana*. The *Buddha* taught that all people should take responsibility for their own spiritual liberation (which is why he did not appoint a successor to continue his movement after he died).

The Constituents of the Eightfold Path are as Follows:

Right view – understanding the reality of life

Right purpose – a spiritual life requires discipline and motivation

Right Speech – abstaining from lies, cruel, frivolous and coarse words

Right action – actions which don't lead to hurtful consequences

Right livelihood – a person should not lead him or her to harmful

Right effort – a spiritual life requires constant single-minded focus on the goal of enlightenment

Right mindfulness – the mind's ability to focus all attention on what is happening in the present moment

Right concentration – the ability to remain effortlessly peaceful, despite what is occurring externally, physically or emotionally.

Emerging from the Buddha's first sermon are three central ideas, which are called in Buddhism the 'three marks of existence':

Non-permanence (*anicca*): all things, both physical and psychological, are always changing.

Non-substance (*anatta*): the consequence of *anicca* is that nothing is eternal. There is no individual soul or world soul.

Non-satisfactoriness (*dukkha*): all attempts to resist the reality of *anicca* and *anatta* lead to the experience of *dukkha*.

In combination, the 'three marks of existence' were an entirely new idea in Indian religious thought at that time. However, the *Buddha* did use spiritual ideas that were current during his life, namely *samsāra* and *karma*, but he reinterpreted them according to his spiritual realizations. He interpreted *samsāra* not as soul transmigration, because there is no soul, but rather that some continuity of ignorance is maintained after death and into another body. The Buddha explained that what is commonly termed the self is a collection of five forces (*khandhas*), namely, form, sensation, perception, emotions and consciousness. According to the *Buddha*, consciousness extends beyond death and informs the formation of further lives.

Similarly the *Buddha* said that *karma* is not a deterministic law. Past actions will cause results, but, by altering one's path, actions and thoughts in the present, these results can be experienced with wisdom, which leads to more conscious choices in the future.

One of the most difficult ideas in early Buddhism is dependent origination, or *paticca-samupada* in the early Buddhist language of Pali. Dependent origination is connected to *anicca* and *anatta* in that it describes all things as being interdependent. This means that as everything happens, everything else is affected at the same time. The complexity of the idea obviously rests in the enormity of its implications. If everything is dependent on everything else, then our conventional ideas of space and time are brought into question and hence also the trust-worthiness of our sensory experiences. Ultimately, dependent origination makes belief in God impossible (unless God also is subject to change).

The Development of Two Schools¹⁶

Shortly after the death of the *Buddha*, his followers called a large meeting to define the new movement. This was called the First Council. It took place at Rajagaha. The earliest Buddhists were monks and nuns and therefore were not members of lay society. This early group of Buddhists struggled to set limits to define their activities and beliefs. Two more councils were convened within a century and a half after the death of the *Buddha* at Vesali and Paliputra respectively. The main issue at the Second and Third Councils was a growing rift between conservative and liberal elements in the *sangha*. The conservative elements tended to believe that only monks could become enlightened or *arahants*. The liberal elements wanted to include the laity into the *sangha*. As a result of these differences, there was eventually a split in the *sangha* between *Theravada* ("the way of the elders"), formed from the conservative elements and *Mahāyāna* ("the large school"), comprised of the liberal adherents.

The Canon

Theravada monks were responsible for the first Buddhist writings, called the *Tipitaka* ("the three Baskets"), in the first century BCE. These writings became the *Theravada* canon. The *Tipitaka* are:

Vinaya Pitaka: Rules for Monks

Sutta Pitaka: Suttas or the Buddha's discourses; these are divided into five parts:

Digha (long) *Nikaya*, *Majjhima* (medium length) *Nikaya*, *Samyutta Nikaya*, *Anguttara Nikaya*, *Khuddaka Nikaya*

Abhidhamma Pitaka: Advanced systemizations of the Buddha's teachings

Mahayana and Theravada Go Their Separate Ways¹⁷

By the seventh century CE, very few remnants of Buddhism remained in India. There were several reasons for this including the invasion of Huns and the re-absorption of Buddhism into Hinduism. *Theravada* migrated to Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. *Mahayana* moved into Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Ja-

¹⁶C. S. Prebish & D. Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, Ch. 5, 75-93.

¹⁷C. S. Prebish & D. Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, Ch. 6, 94-113 and Alan W. Watts, 'Mahayana Buddhism,' in *The Way of Zen*, Part 1, Ch. 3, 77-96.

pan and Afghanistan. Today, various forms of *Mahâyâna* Buddhism are also represented in North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Southern Africa.

Mahayana

Mahâyâna developed between the third and the first centuries BCE in north-western India. In that region, around the Punjab, there was at that time a large mix of different cultures, namely Indian, Greek, Syrian and Scythian. The region lay on trade routes connecting China to Europe. As a result of these diverse influences, *Mahâyâna* became dynamic and flexible, which explains why *Mahâyâna* could migrate into so many different cultures.

Mahâyâna Gave Rise to Four Developments in Buddhism

An interesting development in *Mahâyâna* was that *bhakti* found its way from Hinduism into Buddhism. The *Buddha* was increasingly depicted in various icons and became the object of devotional worship.

Mahâyâna also extended the idea of *Buddha* from singular to plural. Rather than being an historical person, Buddhahood became an energetic form, sometimes represented in human form but, at times, Buddhas are found dwelling in heavenly realms. *Bodhisattvas* ("Buddhas-to-be") are energetic forms who help others to enlightenment. They are not specific to *Mahâyâna*, as Siddhartha himself was a Buddha-to-be who came to help others to enlightenment. In *Mahâyâna* there are many such *Bodhisattvas*. In China and Japan, *Bodhisattvas* also took female form, for example *Avalokitesvara*.

Lastly, *Mahâyâna* also created more scope for laity to involve themselves in the *sangha*. The *Bodhisattva* notion is founded on the belief that all men and women have the potential to become Buddhas. Therefore *Mahâyâna* sees all creatures and life forms as not only having the potential to become a Buddha, but already in *Buddha Nature*. All that is required is the realization of this reality.

*Mahayana Scriptures*¹⁸

The *prajna-paramita sutras* ("the wisdom that has gone beyond") comprise a large body of scriptures. These texts emphasize compassion and the idea that things are empty of substance. Some of the most popular scriptures from the *prajna-paramita* are the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra.

*Mahayana Philosophy*¹⁹

Mahâyâna gave rise to two extremely sophisticated philosophical schools, *Madhymika* and *Yogâcâra*. In many ways these two schools introduced completely innovative ideas into the world of philosophy the world over. They were so revolutionary that to a

¹⁸C. S. Prebish & D. Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, Ch. 4, 82-98.

¹⁹P. Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989).

certain extent modern Western philosophies still cannot match them for subtlety of thought.

Madhyamika was developed by *Nāgārjuna* in northern India in the second century CE. His thought was so profound that it later influenced Shankara's philosophy in the eighth century CE which, in effect, shaped modern Hindu thought.

Yogâcâra was developed by two brothers, *Asanga* and *Vasubandhu*, who lived in northern India in the fourth century CE. They later moved to what is modern day Afghanistan. Their philosophical writings prefigured Freudian psychology and phenomenology by nearly 1500 years.

A Conclusion of Sorts

Our introductory tour of Hinduism and Buddhism is drawing to a close. It began from the shores of the South African Natal coast in the late nineteenth century. It then moved north to the old Transvaal Province in the early twentieth century and then even further north to the great Indian sub-continent and back in time to nearly 3000 BCE. We then left India and began to follow Buddhism's migration into Asia.

We did not follow Buddhism into the West. Nor did we look at Hinduism's migration into Africa, Britain and North America. These are vast subjects and deserve to be studied in depth. Very interesting further studies into Hinduism and Buddhism could include Hindu ecology, Hindu diaspora, Hinduism and modernity, Dalai Lama studies, Buddhism and human rights, Buddhism and ecology, Buddhism and War, Buddhist activism and American Buddhism.

The studies into Hinduism and Buddhism are part of a larger search for global meaning. This is an awesome task, but one should relax; the journey takes its own time. It makes its point gently. Religions from different world cultures have so much to give the world. Although they are different from our own culture, they are not evil because they are different. Religious cultures need to be shared, not feared or owned. Religions should evoke responses in us; they can evoke an aesthetic response, or offer interesting views of the world and the cosmos; they can give us meaning, or they can speak silently in the language of the heart. But to 'evoke' is different from 'instruct': instruction is not the goal. To listen, that is our education. Ultimately we want to reach an understanding between cultures. When understanding is reached, a powerful point is made. It does not threaten any points of view. It does not say, "this is strange" or "these people are strangers". It does not say, "there is so much difference here". In the end we say, "There is so much beauty here."

CHAPTER TWENTY

A General Introduction to Philosophy: Its Tasks and Methods

T. A. Chimuka

Introduction

This work is largely a result of experience, spanning close to a decade, of teaching an introductory course on philosophy at an African University. The primary aim of the chapter is to introduce the discipline to students who have never studied it formally, and who have been made by history to despise African cultures.¹

We all become philosophers at some point or other in life. However, we do not always have the same understanding of the philosophical enterprise. Strange ideas are being tossed about regarding what philosophy is. Many students coming out of high school take it as one of the spurious sciences.² Some people do not bother working out the definition of philosophy but rather concentrate on its usefulness. For these people, philosophy is useless in that it does not put food on the table. It is seen as an optional enterprise that may be taken up as a leisure activity especially by the rich with lots of spare time on their hands. Others take it as one of those hard and highly abstract subjects. Whereas some embrace it, others shy away from it. Again, whereas some appreciate it, others deplore it. Is there a way out of this conceptual maze? The attempt here is to make philosophy understood both by lay-people and academicians. Consider the following cases below, and determine the types of philosophical issues raised therein.³

We value the earth and the life it supports. But one of the main problems for the earth is the human race. There are so many humans that they exclude other species, and industrial societies cause ecological disasters. Humans are intelligent enough to

¹Before 1945 it was largely assumed that African cultures were primitive and that they contributed nothing to world civilizations.

²Most students coming to join the University from high school have no idea what the discipline is all about. Those who have come across the term take it as a pseudo-science which is dangerous to faith and should be abandoned forthwith.

³The cases are adopted from Morton (1996) and Lawhead (2002) and the last one is a hypothetical creation out of typical African experiences.

love the earth and to see the harm they are doing to it. So, one duty that humans can understand is the duty to reduce the damage to the planet. This will mean an earth with far fewer humans on it. It may mean that the earth would be best with no humans at all.⁴

Two six-year olds, Maggie and Natasha, are arguing over a sand-castle at the beach. Natasha says, "You can't play with my sand castle. I worked hard to build it, so it is mine!" Maggie replies, "The sand belongs to everyone. You can't own it. Besides, we aren't at school so there are no rules. I can do anything I want. If you don't let me play with this sand-castle, I'll bop you on the head". Natasha retorts, "You do that and my big sister will rearrange your nose".⁵

Christians believe that when people die, their souls live on in heaven or hell. But this becomes very confusing when we look at a person's whole life and wonder which part of it is continued in heaven. Suppose that someone is a good, kind, nice-tempered person and then has an accident and spends the rest of their life with a changed personality. For the last year this person is short-tempered, untruthful, and violent. Is it the earlier or the later personality that has an afterlife? One answer might be that they both do. If God can give a person one afterlife, then he can give them many. So it is possible that after our deaths our lives continue, not from where they stopped, but from all our living moments.⁶

Professor Linda Perry, a behavioural psychologist, has been studying hardened criminals to see what events in their childhood caused them to develop anti-social personalities. On her way to Church, she begins to wonder if her own religious, moral, and career choices are also the inevitable result of previous causes and the built-in features of her personality.⁷

Most of what we believe is unscientific rubbish. Folk remedies for diseases surround us, as does folklore about what makes a happy life, and popular psychology about how to deal with our troubles. We believe in moral codes that we pick up unquestioningly from our parents. But there is very little evidence that any of these things is true. Most of the beliefs and morality of our time may seem to later ages to be superstitious nonsense.⁸

Senator Dale Malone argues, "There is too much sex and violence on TV. We don't allow factories to poison the air we breathe. But people's minds are just as important as their bodies. We must protect the public from moral pollution". Senator Julie Freeman replies, "I agree, there is a lot of trash on TV. However in a free society,

⁴A. Morton, *Philosophy in Practice: An Introduction to the Main Questions* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), xv.

⁵W. F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy* (Belmont: Wadsworth Group, 2002), xxii.

⁶A. Morton, *Philosophy in Practice...*, xiv.

⁷W. F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery...*, xxii.

⁸A. Morton, *Philosophy in Practice...*, xiv.

we cannot censor any form of expression for this would restrict the free flow of ideas. In the end, the truth would become the victim of its suppressors.⁹

We value justice: we think that an unfair society ought to be changed. And we also value democracy: we think that people ought to have a lot of influence over who makes laws for them and what those laws say. But justice and democracy will always conflict, for people are full of jealousies and resentments of other people, and they usually apply their kind instincts to people close to them. So people will use their democratic power to further their own interests and oppose the interests of others. The only way to get justice is to have impartial, wise rulers who give people what is right, not what the people think they want.¹⁰

Nyasha, a girl of fourteen, stands by the window and stares outside, apparently engrossed in deep reflection. She has had a sleepless night and has awoken much earlier than usual on this day to ponder over the problems surrounding her life. She had been left in charge of her three younger siblings after both her parents had succumbed to AIDS. As she stands there, she begins to murmur, "What is the meaning of life, if parents die before children know enough about the ways of this world?" "Where is God, when all this is happening to us?" "Should I get married so that my brothers will have a stable guardian?" "How will I know that this man is free from AIDS?" The train of thought continues as she remains transfixed on the spot and begins to sob.

In each of these cases, it is apparent that philosophical issues lurk in everyday events. The first case has to do with how the earth is conceptualized. However, it looks as if humans have monopolized the earth to the detriment of other species. In the case of Natasha and Maggie, they are toying around with concepts of justice and rights. The next case presents us with the problem of change and identity as it applies to Christianity and the afterlife. The fourth case deals with the problem of freedom and determinism. Do we ever make genuinely free choices? The next case seeks to subject all our day-to-day beliefs to question: beliefs about reality in general, beliefs about God, beliefs about how AIDS spread and how it can be prevented and so forth. The following two cases are squarely placed in the area of morality. Whereas the one questions the morality of television broadcasting, the other raises issues of justice. The last case presents an orphaned girl who is trying to come to terms with her predicament and find lasting solutions to the personal problems of life. All these cases say something about philosophy and everyday life.

The questions raised by Nyasha are familiar to the African experience. Often the problems encountered in this life are confounding. Some of these problems confront an individual, but others affect the whole society. The questions vary in scope and magnitude, for example: "How can I know that I am a deserving candidate for God's salvation?" "Is there life after death?" "What is the nature of African identity?" "What vision of Africa did nationalists have, when they embarked on the various struggles for independence?" These and related questions are often raised. To some people such

⁹W. F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery*..., xxiii.

¹⁰A. Morton, *Philosophy in Practice*... xiv-xv.

questions are mysterious and unsolvable. However, for others, they are exciting. Those who are excited by them take them as an invitation to philosophise. Philosophy usually begins with perplexity: when the startling, the unusual and the paradoxical happens to us.¹¹ In the case of Nyasha, she is asking what meaning life still has, if AIDS snatches away parents leaving children to fend for themselves. She is also questioning whether there is a God in heaven who watches over and cares for His people. Her predicament tempts her to rush into marriage, hopefully to a resourceful and caring husband. However, she doesn't seem competent enough to distinguish between an AIDS-free man and an infected one!

This chapter attempts to define philosophy, to sketch with very broad strokes the general aims of the discipline and the methods employed in its study. It is divided into four sections. The first concentrates on a working definition. The next section examines the aims and activities of philosophers. The third section examines the various methods employed by practitioners and students of philosophy and the last focuses on the value of philosophy.

Defining Philosophy

The term 'philosophy' defies a simple and straightforward definition. The discipline is considered by many to be peculiar and complex. The strangest thing about philosophy is that it is a discipline which continually seeks to understand itself! The story of philosophy has been presented graphically as that of 'the human 'eye' seeking to look into itself without the aid of a mirror'! This sounds strange doesn't it? The strangeness of philosophy lies in the fact that it is a discipline which constantly seeks to define itself and this attempt in itself constitutes doing philosophy. The complexity of philosophy is often explained in terms of a number of factors. Firstly, it is often said that the subject covers the whole intellectual spectrum and leaves nothing out of its concern, yet it also deals with no specific subject matter. Thus it differs in a significant way from specialised disciplines such as physics, psychology, chemistry, biology and others. Secondly, it has always meant different things to different people, even to the philosophers themselves. For some people, philosophy is highly abstract and far removed from the concerns of every day; for example, it cannot rescue someone attacked by a ferocious monster. For others, philosophy concerns itself with elusive entities such as quarks, photons and protons. Often, there are people who consider it ridiculous as it questions whether those people in our homes are indeed our parents! However, for others it is 'unintelligible', as philosophers sometimes raise questions about everyday objects such as tables, dogs and cats. For example, a philosopher may ask what a person is, yet he meets people every day, both in his own person and in the person of others.

The fact that philosophy is considered hidden and far removed from everyday affairs of men and women may suggest that it is irrelevant to life, for if it is thrust away from their reach it cannot be used to solve the practical problems of life. But is this

¹¹A. Minton & T. A. Shipka, *Philosophy: Paradox and Discovery* (Dallas: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 3.

true? If people use this word in their conversations and if they philosophise, surely the view that philosophy is elusive must fall away.

In the Western world, particularly its classical antecedent, 'philosophy' connoted the 'love for wisdom'. Due to the extraordinarily wide scope of philosophical investigations, the discipline encompassed everything that was regarded as human knowledge. Philosophy has been foundational to a number of other subjects; what we call philosophy today used to embrace a number of disciplines—psychology, government, physics or other subjects, even plain commonsense. Etymologically, the term means 'Love of Wisdom'. *Philosophia* connotes love of exercising one's curiosity and intelligence.¹² Given that it was accepted that knowledge was to be discovered in a variety of ways, all those engaged in the search for knowledge were considered philosophers. Historically, there emerged five divisions of philosophy: logic, metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics and ethics. Logic examined the principles of reasoning and attempted to work out acceptable ways of reasoning and exclude those that were not correct. Metaphysics was considered the study of the nature and structure of the entire cosmos.¹³ Epistemology dealt with the various modes of knowing, and with setting the limits of human knowledge. Aesthetics was an inquiry into the nature and criteria for artistic value. Finally, ethics was a study of right and wrong in conduct.

In Africa, the story about philosophic expression in the various cultures was not recognised as authentic until the 20th century.¹⁴ The history of philosophy is thus riddled with incongruities. Africans, too, experience life and encounter challenges that spur them into reflection, as they search for solutions to these problems. Gyekye, commenting on African cultural experiences in modern times, remarks:

[The African experience is] an experience that is clearly many-sided, having resulted not only from an encounter with not only what one might regard as alien cultures and religions but also from problems internal to the practice of the indigenous cultural values, beliefs, and institutions themselves in the setting of the modern world.¹⁵

¹²B. N. Moore & K. Bruder, *Philosophy: The Power of Ideas* (Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1996), 2.

¹³The cosmos was construed as one entity, which encompassed what we now call earth, the aquatic realm and the celestial sphere.

¹⁴J. S. Mbiti makes a spellbinding observation that African traditional religion and philosophy were not taken seriously until about the mid-twentieth century. The publication of *Bantu Philosophy* by Fr. Placide Tempels in 1945 heralded the dawn of a new era in African intellectual history. For the first time, there was an open admission that Africans had their own worldviews and belief systems by which they lived and on which they would fall back when faced by crisis. However, Tempels would not place African philosophy on a par with Western philosophy for reasons best known to himself. The question, "Is there African Philosophy?" no longer warrants serious discussions in philosophy classes, seminars or conferences. (See F. Ochieng-Odhiambo, *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, 1997).)

¹⁵K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), vii.

The search for answers to the deep-seated problems of life is not limited to race, geography or even gender. Regrettably, however, the story of philosophy has been marred by conflicts and prejudices. Just as the history of philosophy sidelined Africans, the same was true for women. The whole history of philosophy has very little mention, if any, of the contribution of women to its development. This, incidentally, is the dark side of the historical development of the philosophical enterprise.

Granted that philosophy appears to beckon all and sundry, it is certainly also attractive to Africans as they too try to interpret their own experiences and wrestle against the odds of their lives. As a result, it is fruitful and pragmatic to consider philosophy as a basic human activity. All people desire knowledge and pursue it. As Minton and Shipka put it:

Wisdom has always been considered as knowledge in the broadest sense. It does not concern things that huddle on the periphery of life. It is knowledge directed to the fundamental and pervasive concerns of existence. To desire knowledge is to seek the principles that cut through the superficial and trivial facts that clutter our intellectual landscape, revealing the basic shape of things beneath. Philosophy, as a quest for wisdom, is an attempt to provide a vision of the world that is systematic and clear, in which connections between significant facts are made manifest. It is the search for first things and last things – for first principles and their ultimate implications.¹⁶

However, at this point we need to distinguish philosophy from other intellectual activities. As Brummer explains, due to academic division of labour, intellectual disciplines have come to be distinct, one from another. The interests of a geologist, astronomer and a theologian can be differentiated.¹⁷ Usually, the difference is manifest in the nature of activities carried out and the type of questions these intellectuals ask in the pursuit of their respective disciplines. But exactly what is philosophy?

According to Adam Morton, “Philosophy is thinking about thinking”.¹⁸ We think about many things: what the world is like, what other people are thinking and feeling or what we should do. As Aristotle clearly puts it in *Metaphysics* (928b10) “It is through wonder that men begin and originally begin to philosophize, wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities and then by gradual progression raising question about the greater matters too, for example about the origins of the universe”.¹⁹ We have certain beliefs about the world. Some of these beliefs are core but others are peripheral. These beliefs are closely knit into a systematic whole. This web of beliefs is what is called a worldview. Our world views filter out unimportant beliefs and impregnate experience

¹⁶A. Minton & T. A. Shipka, *Philosophy*..., 1.

¹⁷V. Brummer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), 1.

¹⁸A. Morton, *Philosophy in Practice*..., 4.

¹⁹Quoted in N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning: A Study in the Methodology of Philosophizing*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 4.

with meaning.²⁰ This web of beliefs and values is largely latent. However, when new experiences cause a stir in these beliefs, this spurs us into reflection. As Minton and Shipka lucidly put it:

This framework of beliefs and values is largely unconscious and inarticulate; and when it smashes against the hard rock of reality, the dilemma we feel, but do not yet understand, kindles philosophical reflection. As our personal relationships become more complicated, youthful optimism about human nature is tempered by disappointment and hurt. As more and more is demanded of us and we begin to see flaws in ourselves, the infinite horizon of opportunity shrinks in the face of our limitations. As we see ourselves and others repeating the same errors, playing out the same roles, we begin to wonder whether society and nature have conspired to lock us into a mechanical model of reaction impossible to resist. As we grow conscious of the enormous amount of suffering and anguish in the world, seeing at first hand, the vast waste of human life, the old easy answers about a good and loving God are shattered. As we face wholesale changes in the behaviour of society and each decade overthrows the values of the last, we cannot help wondering whether our own commitments will stand the test of time.²¹

When what we have always believed turns out to be suspect or even mistaken, we get confused. Such dilemmas generated by the new experiences force us to reflect on our beliefs in a bid to diffuse the tension or remove altogether the contradiction in our system of beliefs. Indeed, this is the territory of philosophy. And when we think, we follow certain patterns of thought, some correct, others characterised by bedlam. For example, one who has just discovered that he has an HIV infection might be thinking what to do. He might consider a list of options and try to discover the likely consequences for other people if he follows each of these options. And then he might think whether one has the right to inflict those consequences on other people. This manner of thinking may be qualified as moral thinking.²² As David Hume contends, we are creatures of habit, whose formation is shaped not only by biological constitution but also by enculturation – family, peers, teachers, the media, religion and other environmental factors. We have got to organize the helter-skelter of experience into a systematic whole or worldview. And if one is deciding what one should do in a difficult situation one usually relies on the values one absorbed from society as a child. And the emotions one feels in response to a situation are affected by the models and ideals presented to one by one's society.²³

Philosophy ventures to provide rationally cogent answers to our questions about fundamental and wide-ranging issues regarding belief, evaluation and action. It is a cognitive enterprise. An ancillary task of philosophy is to provide the basis for conduct, since we normally act on the basis of our beliefs. In this respect, therefore, philosophy

²⁰A. O'Hear, *What philosophy is*, (London: Penguin, 1985), 16.

²¹A. Minton & T. A. Shipka, *Philosophy...*, 1-2.

²²A. Morton, *Philosophy in Practice...*, 4.

²³A. Morton, *Philosophy in Practice...*, 14-15.

may act as a guide to life.²⁴ Interestingly, philosophy has no distinct information sources of its own. All the substantive materials by means of which it develops answers are borrowed from other disciplines. Zoology is the study of animals, biology is the study of living things and so forth, but philosophy is not like that. It has no distinct subject matter and furnishes no novel facts, but only offers insights into relationships.²⁵ As a matter of fact, philosophy is about everything.²⁶

The fact that philosophers' ideas can influence us without our knowing it raises an important issue. We acquire most of our beliefs, concepts, values and attitudes unconsciously. In other words, we "catch" our beliefs and values the way we catch a cold. When you wake up coughing with a stuffy head and congestion, you know you have a cold. However, you usually do not know when or how you caught the cold. What happened is that the cold virus was floating around in your environment, and you simply breathed it in and now it is part of your internal system. Similarly, ideas and values are floating around in your culture. You simply absorb them without thinking about them, but now they are your beliefs and your values. By studying philosophy historically, you will be able to (i) get a clearer picture of your own beliefs (ii) understand their origins and (iii) see what strengths and weaknesses others have discovered in them. In this way, you will be in a better position to decide whether you want to consciously hold these beliefs or not. Hence, studying the history of philosophy is like reading a consumer magazine to find out about other people's experiences of a product you are thinking of buying.²⁷

Interestingly enough, we often discover that we don't always have consistent views about the world. Some of our views undermine or contradict each other. For example, scientific reasoning may attempt to show that human beings evolved from animals or that human psychology is based on desire for food, power and sex, and this might destroy the foundations of the traditional moral codes that we rely on to solve social problems. Or an attractive way of making political decisions—by democratic voting, for example—might contradict the mathematical or psychological theory that says that this method does not work. Conflicts are always possible between the ways we think about how things are, and ways we think about how they ought to be. The only way to resolve these conflicts is to think about each pattern of thought and what we can expect of it.²⁸

The manner in which we think at any one time is likely to result in changes in our beliefs or desires. Educationists always think about theories of education, and students. They invariably come up with ways of teaching. How do we know that the beliefs they come up with are true? We are always judging beliefs and desires against other beliefs and desires. But this situation is responsible for a worry that lies behind many philosophical projects. Anthony O'Hear stresses this position as he notes that

²⁴N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning...*, 4.

²⁵N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning...*, 4.

²⁶Alston and Brandt, *The Problems of Philosophy...* 1

²⁷W. F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery...*, xxv.

²⁸A. Morton, *Philosophy in Practice...*, 5.

we don't all see the world the same way, hence the need to develop clear, coherent and credible worldviews.²⁹

Questions of a reflective nature arise from the fact that we have different views on this matter and some of these views are not correct. Our views about the world are generated by common sense, but unfortunately our views are many and at times incompatible. The challenge therefore is to try and find patterns of thought that would give us the best worldview possible. There are times when our senses betray us, for example hallucinations and optical illusions. Does this mean that we should abandon our common-sense views of the world? Some scholars would like us to abandon common sense and adopt the scientific view of the world. Do you think this is the way forward?

There is no doubt that we do usually interpret evidence for new beliefs in terms of the beliefs we already have. So, for example, if you seem to see a purple and green-striped elephant suddenly appear and dance on its trunk around the room and then disappear, you are likely to dismiss it as an illusion or a hallucination. Why? Because without even knowing it you hold the belief that there are no purple and green-striped elephants, and that people who seem to see what does not exist are suffering from illusions or hallucinations. If you had been raised in a different culture, you might have thought that you really were seeing a particularly vivid manifestation of the elephant god.

Many philosophers have wanted to show that some beliefs and values are not just self-sustaining delusions. In doing this, they have often made an assumption which I shall call the certainty assumption. Some people are dogmatic about their opinions. That is, they have very definite beliefs and they cannot see how any intelligent or well-informed person could disagree with them. Others are rather sceptical about their beliefs. That is, they are inclined to think that the truth, if such a thing exists, is very hard to know, and so they would not give too much credence to what anyone says.³⁰

Another way of looking at it is to say that studying philosophy is a way to develop intellectual muscles. You cannot become strong and physically fit by squeezing marshmallows or lifting blocks of Styrofoam. We develop our muscles by pitting them against something that offers resistance. Similarly, as long as we surround ourselves with people and books whose ideas are comfortable and like our own, we remain intellectually flabby.

Philosophy, in the fullest sense of the word, is the activity of evaluating and justifying our beliefs and those of other people. It is important to keep in mind the three criteria for evaluating our own and others' ideas. Stated in abbreviated form, to make them easy to remember, they are clarity, confirmation and coherence. There may be others, but these three are certainly basic. We can use these criteria to evaluate the individual claims made by a particular philosopher as well as to assess a philosophy as a whole package.

²⁹A. O'Hear, *What Philosophy is...*, 11-15.

³⁰A. Morton, *Philosophy in Practice...*, 15.

Conceptual clarity is the first criterion that we should apply to a philosophy. Concepts and words are the vehicles of ideas. But if our vehicles are not well-tuned, we won't make much progress. Experimental confirmation is the second test that a philosophy must pass. Since the purpose of philosophy is to clarify our experience, a philosophy is not adequate unless it "fits" experience. This means that the philosophy must not conflict with any well-established facts and it must be supported by experience, as well as making our experience more intelligible.³¹

Rational coherence is the third criterion. Minimally, this criterion requires that a philosophy does not contain a contradiction or that it is not in conflict with itself. Even if a philosophy does not contain a direct contradiction in terms of what the philosopher says, it may fall to the level of incoherence. We may find a contradiction in an unstated assumption that the philosophers make, or in a conclusion that logically follows from their central claims. For example, the sceptic makes the claim that "there is no absolute truth, and if there were, we could not know it." However, Socrates and Augustine battled the sceptic in their own times by pointing out that scepticism contradicts itself. The sceptic claims that "we cannot know what is true", but in making this claim, we must assume that he/she believes that "the sceptical philosophy is true". For this reason their critics claim the sceptic's position undermines itself.

A more subtle application of the incoherence criterion recognises that a philosophy may be free of outright logical contradictions but its claims may not 'hang together' very well. For example, a theist may claim that God is loving and all-powerful when at the same time innocent people in our world suffer. Similarly, some philosophers maintain that all our behaviour and choices are determined by psychological causes not under our control, whilst also maintaining that we are morally responsible for our actions. To avoid the charge of incoherence, both the theists and the determinists have some hard work to do. They must show that the apparent conflicts can be resolved and the disparate ideas in their systems can be successfully woven together into a harmonious whole. This point is succinctly made by Rescher:

Philosophy does not furnish us with new ground – level facts; it endeavors to systematize, harmonize, and coordinate the old into coherent structures in whose terms we can meaningfully address our larger questions. The prime mover of philosophy is the urge to systematic adequacy – to achieving consistency, coherence, and rational order within the framework of what we accept. Its work is a matter of disciplining of our cognitive commitments to make overall sense of them – to render them harmonious and coherent.³²

Philosophy's Aims and Activities

Another useful way of understanding philosophy is to examine the aims and types of activities undertaken by philosophers. In a very general sense, philosophy may be regarded as an intellectual activity, which seeks to provide satisfactory answers to the

³¹A. Morton, *Philosophy in Practice*..., xxvi.

³²N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 47.

'big questions' that we have regarding the world and the manner in which it is configured. According to Rescher,

the 'big questions' in philosophy are explanatory questions, questions whose answers 'explain the facts' thereby enabling us to understand why things are indeed as they are. The history of philosophy consists in an on-going intellectual struggle to develop ideas that render comprehensible seemingly endless diversity and complexity that surrounds us on all sides. The instruments of philosophizing are ideational resources of concepts and theories and it deploys them in a quest for understanding, in the endeavour to create an edifice of thought able to provide us with an intellectual home that affords a habitable thought shelter in a complicated and challenging world.³³

Philosophical aims are quite general. Philosophy is the anchor of a significant portion of our cognitive enterprise as human beings. Our existence is rooted in a challenging and hostile environment. The need to know becomes imperative as this knowledge is important for our survival.³⁴ We are spurred on to hunt for knowledge by the discomfort of ignorance. A good reason to explain why people look for knowledge is that it is their evolutionary destiny. We are not as numerous as bees nor are we as strong as whales so we survive by means of our brainpower.³⁵ Whenever we are baffled by unresolved issues, we cannot function. This takes away our happiness and a sense of security. Hence the urge for philosophical reflection becomes even stronger.

Philosophy strives after the systematic integration of knowledge that the sciences initially promised but have never managed to deliver, because of their increasing division of labour and never-ending pursuit of specialized detail. For what philosophy endeavours (or should endeavour) to do, is to look at the sum total of what we know and tell us what it means for us – where the moral lies. Dealing with being and value in general – with possibility, actuality and worth – the concerns of philosophy are thus universal and all-embracing.³⁶ The search for hidden assumptions and fundamental premises is actually part of a larger enterprise. In the end, philosophy should present us with a unified vision of the world and our place in it. It is impossible, however, to identify and evaluate the bedrock of our belief system without uncovering the relationships, however vague, among basic beliefs. Paradox and discovery are two sides of the same coin. Things seem paradoxical when two firmly-established beliefs, which have been kept apart and allowed to function in their own domains, are brought side by side and are seen to be inconsistent. Until then we really do not know what we believe, for usually our assumptions are nebulous and vague. We sharpen them by experimentation – by examining the effect they have on other areas of experience.³⁷ Philosophy, it seems, is speculation about matters that have no final answers. Religion, morality, the

³³N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 3-4.

³⁴N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 6.

³⁵N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 7.

³⁶N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 4.

³⁷A. Minton & T. A. Shipka, *Philosophy*..., 5-6.

existence of the soul, free will, the ultimate structure of the world – such issues cannot be treated with precision. Because everything is relevant to its concerns, the task of philosophy is to provide a sort of ‘*expositio mundi*’, a traveller’s guidebook to reality at large. The mission of philosophy is to ask, and to answer in a rational and disciplined way, all those great questions about life in this world that people wonder about in their reflective moments.³⁸ Since systematisation is the proper instrument of philosophical inquiry, the effective pursuit of philosophical mission calls for the construction of a doctrinal system that answers our questions in a coherent and comprehensive way.³⁹

Philosophy seeks to bring rational order, system and intelligibility to the confusing diversity of our cognitive affairs. It strives for orderly arrangement in the cognitive sphere that will enable us to find our way about in the world.⁴⁰ Philosophy, then, is an inquiry which seeks to resolve the problems arising from the incoherence of the matter of our extra-philosophical commitments. To abandon philosophy is to rest content with incoherence.⁴¹

As a venture in rational inquiry, philosophy seeks for the best available, the ‘rational optimal’, answers to our information-in-hand, transcending questions about how matters stand in the world. Experience-based conjecture—theorizing, if you will—is the most promising available instrument for question resolution in the face of imperfect information. It is the tool for use by finite intelligences, providing them not with the best possible answer but with the best available answer, the putative best that one can manage to secure in the actually-existing conditions in which we do and must conduct our epistemic labours.⁴²

In philosophy, as everywhere throughout the domain of estimation, one confronts an inevitable risk of error. This risk takes two forms. On the one hand we face errors of commission in possibly accepting what is false. On the other, we face errors of omission in rejecting what is true. Like any other cognitive enterprise, philosophy has to navigate the difficult passage between ignorance and mistakes.⁴³ Two equally unacceptable extremes offer themselves at this stage. The first is to accept nothing, to fall into pervasive scepticism. Here we achieve a total exemption from errors of commission, but unfortunately do so at the expense of endless errors of omission. The other extreme is to fall into pervasive gullibility, to accept pretty much everything that is put before us. Here we achieve total exemption from the errors of omission, but unfortunately do so at the expense of maximal errors of commission. In philosophy, as in other branches of rational inquiry, we must strive for the best available middle way, the best available balance. Though we realize that there are no guarantees, we do desire and require reasonable estimates.⁴⁴

³⁸N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 4.

³⁹N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 1.

⁴⁰N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 7.

⁴¹N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 9.

⁴²N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 14.

⁴³N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 14.

⁴⁴N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 14.

Philosophers are concerned with a careful examination and analysis of views held in everyday life. Firstly, the philosopher looks at what are our most important concepts (words) and tries to determine what we mean by them. Often we use the term ‘knowledge’ in our conversations: what do we mean by that term? What are the grounds for knowledge? By asking these questions, the philosopher believes that we can understand things better and have a sure basis for holding on to beliefs as well as for throwing away those we do not have reasons to believe.

Secondly, a philosopher also looks at people’s arguments and analyses them. We need to also pay special attention to evaluating arguments. In setting forth a philosophical position, philosophers usually employ a number of arguments to establish the main pillars of their philosophy. However, an author may fail to clearly lay out his or her arguments. In this case, it may take some rooting around and restating of the main points to extract a precisely-formulated argument.⁴⁵ These questions are often raised: Are the arguments valid? Are the premises true? What assumptions lie behind the arguments? Consider pre-suppositions: for instance, if Juma and Salome are married and on one occasion Juma comes home from town and the wife enthusiastically asks, “Honey, where is the chocolate?” in this case we can say that the wife is assuming that Juma had the money and also that he was willing to buy her the chocolate bar. We may end up asking whether this assumption was justified.

An argument consists of one or more statements called “premises” which are used as evidence, grounds or reasons for asserting another statement, called a conclusion. Although there are several techniques of analysing arguments, there are two basic questions to ask: “Are the premises acceptable?” and, “Do the premises provide adequate support for the conclusion?” The first question examines the clarity and plausibility of the premises. The second question focuses on the acceptability of the form of reasoning. An argument provides good reasons for believing its conclusion only if the answer to both questions is in the affirmative.

Thirdly, it is characteristic of philosophers to ask questions. There is no field of study of which a philosopher would not ask questions. The philosopher asks questions of a certain nature. He asks questions characteristic of philosophy. What questions are philosophical? This is not something philosophers themselves are agreed on. One distinctive feature of a philosophical question is that it cannot be answered by looking around for some facts. This is not to discredit the value of facts—facts are relevant to a philosophical question—but they cannot provide us with a definite answer. For instance, what fact can answer the question, “Do computers have feelings?” Philosophical questions set us thinking. Whether or not in the end we get final answers is beside the point. As a matter of fact, many philosophical questions have not been answered. Questions can be refined, sub-divided or abandoned altogether. Not all things are lost in the process. The exercise is important in that it produces conceptual clarity.

Lastly, philosophy also proceeds by interpreting texts. The point of the interpretative venture is to facilitate comprehension. Pre-eminently this means removing ob-

⁴⁵W. F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery*..., xxviii.

stacles to understanding such as avoidable complications, inconsistencies, seeming paradoxes and the like. Interpretations exist to ease the access way; the rational economy of cognitive effort is the governing principle of exegetical text interpretation. Text interpretation is a form of intellectual cartography and, on this basis, can proceed at very different levels of scale. It can, in practice or in principle, deal with phrases, with sentences, with passages, and indeed, with entire books and systems. Interpretation can proceed at a macro or micro level. However, at every level, the name of the game is that in exegetically interpreting philosophical texts we seek to make smooth the path to understanding – to remove, overcome, or explain away obscurities, ambiguities, conflicts and other such obstacles to understanding.⁴⁶ This is also a very important philosophical activity.

Philosophical Methodology

Every individual has a philosophy, a system of beliefs about philosophic issues such as love, the good life, death, the value of money, duty to country and the role of government. A person may form these beliefs by getting ideas from his/her parents, peers, church, or perhaps even from reading Plato. But the development of a philosophy rests ultimately with the individual. Whether one's philosophy is sophisticated or elementary, enduring or changeable, it cannot be a task delegated to others. A mature philosophy consists of reflection on experience to search for underlying meanings and principles that can guide one's life. In a work entitled "Fixation of belief", C. S. Pierce identifies four methods by which we fix our beliefs: method of tenacity, a priori method, method of intuition and the method of science. The method of science is considered the best approach to settling beliefs.

Hebert Figel further elucidates the scientific method. For him, science generally aims at description, explanation and prediction. The first aim is basic and indispensable, the second and the third arise as the most desirable fruits of scientific labours whenever inquiry rises beyond the mere fact-gathering stage. The quest for scientific knowledge is regulated by certain standards or criteria which may best be formulated as ideals to be approximated, but perhaps never fully attained: inter-subjective testability, reliability, definiteness, coherence and comprehensiveness.

Another important methodological aspect of philosophy is narrative. According to Rescher, "in seeking to understand the ways of the world about us, humans proceed in a narrative context: What we want is a coherent story that makes sense overall, a global narrative, an all-comprehending account, a cosmic narrative as it were." The construction of such a narrative is subject to an effort to achieve certain idealized desiderata, certain regulative ideals such as narrative unity, economy, closure layering and depth.⁴⁷

A coherent narrative, that is to say, answers to the ideals of a cognitive system and is, as far as possible, self-engendering, self-sustaining and self-sufficient. Such

⁴⁶Rescher N. *Philosophical Reasoning*...62

⁴⁷N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning*..., 45-6.

narrative coherence or integrity would ideally hold true for any substantial cognitively significant production – be it a work of fiction, like a play or a novel, or a scientific or mathematical treatise. And it holds true specifically for philosophy as well. Philosophy's mission is to develop a coherent narrative that provides a systematic understanding of the human condition. Philosophy at large is a narrative about the human condition in relation to the social and physical setting within which our lives unfold. It seeks to provide a coherent or systematic account that answers 'the big questions' we have about the world and our place within it.⁴⁸

The Value of Philosophy

Philosophy is valuable in itself. This is not to say that philosophical reflection is the whole end of living, but merely that such activity is an essential part of happiness. Happiness is growth. It is the expansion and refinement of those powers and drives that make us distinctly human. Since curiosity is one expression of those essentially human capabilities, philosophical reflection is an important part of self-fulfilment. The value of philosophy does not lie exclusively in the answers it gives. There is no systematic body of knowledge called "philosophy". There are, instead, people trying to think systematically about the fundamental questions of life. The great thinkers of the past differed in their conclusions, and those of today are no better. However, this is to be expected in an undertaking so grand, so final, and so audacious. The most enduring value of philosophy lies in the habit of mind it breeds in those who have discovered its pleasures. It produces a vision of things large enough to generate a life plan, a direction, tempered by a nagging suspicion that the vision may be an illusion. Philosophic thought, the exhilarating experience of paradox and discovery, is the first step towards a civilized faith.⁴⁹

Philosophy does not save the hunter from a charging buffalo, nor does it bring food onto the table. But it is also no less true that 'man does not live by bread alone'. The physical side of our nature that impels us to eat, drink and be merry is just one of its sides—we seek knowledge not only because we wish to, but also because we must. For us humans, the need for information, for knowledge to nourish the mind, is every bit as critical as the need to nourish the body. Cognitive vacuity or dissonance is as distressing to us as hunger and pain.⁵⁰ Just like any other discipline, philosophy has theoretical consequences. The questions philosophers ask, even those that are abstruse and abstract and seemingly far-removed from the practical concerns of life are still important because they make the mind active.

⁴⁸N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning...*, 46.

⁴⁹A. Minton & T. A. Shipka, *Philosophy...*, 1-12.

⁵⁰N. Rescher, *Philosophical Reasoning...*, 7.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Logic, Critical Thinking and Science

I. B. Ikpe

Introduction: What is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking embodies the process and product of thinking correctly both within a formal academic enterprise and within the informal situations of everyday life. Such correct thinking is usually the product of effective identification, consideration and evaluation of information, eschewing in the process personal biases and prejudices while at the same time analysing the information for the hidden prejudices and misconceptions of others. More often than not, it is the product of critical thinking that is usually recognized and celebrated as critical thinking. For instance, most people are favourably impressed by shrewd decisions and précised interpretation and predictions of events. Others marvel when the proper choice of words is applied with positive effects to situations that could otherwise have turned ugly. However, this involves celebrating the product of critical thinking and, perhaps, ignoring the process that led to such celebrated ends. But it is important to recognise that critical thinking does not only consist in the products of critical thinking. One can, for instance, make a shrewd decision following a hunch and without consciously striving towards making such a decision. Also one can make a précised interpretation or prediction of events by chance. Again, one can speak from the heart and in the process defuse a potentially explosive situation. However, critical thinking is not a game of chance. This is why the process of critical thinking is important. It is always better when a shrewd decision or correct interpretation or prediction of an event follows a thinking process that can be replicated in similar situations and it is only the process of thinking correctly that can ensure this.

Critical thinking is usually associated with Logic, which is sometimes referred to as the science and art of correct thinking. For some scholars, Critical Thinking is merely another name for Logic and involves a study of arguments, especially the rules that govern the proper use of arguments. For others, Critical Thinking lies outside the rigid mould of rules and processes that govern arguments and, instead, involves an application of such rules to everyday problems such that the monotony that is sometimes associated with the process of recognising and understanding the application of such rules is avoided. The resulting discipline is thus less rigorous than Logic but more user-friendly, focusing more on problem-solving and the practical application of

such rules. Thus, critical thinking in this second sense seeks to achieve the same goals as Logic, in promoting the analysis and critical evaluation of ideas, but without insisting on the identification and textbook application of the rules of reasoning. Irrespective of the approach one chooses to adopt in Critical Thinking, the final goal is to ensure the clarity of thought and level of broadmindedness that enable one to be open to new ideas and yet remain unassuming in making critical decisions that affect oneself and others. This is not to say that only people who have studied Logic or Critical Thinking can reason and critically evaluate ideas. Indeed, some people are naturally good at thinking critically, while others find it difficult to relate events and ideas in a proper manner so as to reach fruitful decisions, but everyone can improve their ability to think critically through formal training. The difference, however, between someone with a native wit, or what can be referred to as a natural ability for critical thought, and those with formal training is that those with a formal training can consciously make critical thinking an aspect of their lives and, by so doing, consciously guard against the different pitfalls that result from mistakes in reasoning. Also, a formal training in critical thinking can help others to organize their thoughts in a more consistent, well-organised and integrated way, thereby helping them live more fruitful lives. Thus, though the skills associated with critical thinking are not necessarily acquired in the classroom, a formal study of Critical Thinking is beneficial, especially in an increasingly globalised world.

Critical Thinking takes for granted that each individual has latent cognitive skills, which can be used in desirable or undesirable ways. A desirable way of using such skills could be to focus on solving a particular problem or creating an innovation that furthers our objectives as individuals within the society. In order to achieve this, there is a need for us to continually evaluate our thinking even as the thinking process is occurring. This is because we may be, and often are, influenced by circumstances in our thinking processes. It is essential for us to continually scrutinise our reasons, asking ourselves “whether our reasoning – our critical thought process – is flawed at any point, and if so, where, and how might we correct that flaw?” What all this means is that our thinking has to be focused on a particular issue with the aim of:

Understanding the Issue

Appreciating the kind of decision that is needed concerning the issue

Identifying the different options that are available to us in relation to the issue

Assessing the emotional issues that may affect our judgment in the circumstance

Identifying the people who will be affected by our decision and how they will be affected.

Looking into the future to see how our decision will affect our relationship with others

Assessing how our decision will affect the way people see us.

In using and applying critical thinking skills, therefore, it is important to keep in mind that critical thinking is merely a tool, which can be used correctly and incorrectly. It is also important to note that, as a tool, critical thinking can be applied not only to our everyday lives but also in our formal studies in such a way that our understanding and

appreciation of the strengths and shortfalls of our formal studies is further enhanced. One of the disciplines that we can better understand with the tools of Critical Thinking is Science, especially as our world and everyday existence is, in one way or another, affected by science.

Critical Thinking and the Sciences

There are not many people in the world who are still untouched by Science. This is because, for a long time, Science has been the main vehicle of development in the world and is responsible in many ways for who we are and how we interact with others in the world around us. What we eat, what we wear, where we go and what we do is ultimately affected by science in such a way that we can emphatically say that without science our lives would have been remarkably different. For instance, it is possible for us to travel great distances each day because of the availability of different kinds of motorised transport. Again, we eat various exotic foods that have been modified to taste better, or preserved to last beyond their normal span of life. Also, we wear apparel that has been produced through complicated scientific processes in distant places. Even those who live in very remote areas of the world, or consciously try to avoid science and its perks, are still affected by such spinoffs of science as global warming and climate change. Thus, to a lot of people, Science appears to be an octopus with tentacles in every aspect of human endeavour and with a seeming ability to proffer solutions to even the most intractable problems. Thus even when the repercussions from Science result in such problems as global warming or nuclear radiation, we tend to trust in the ability of science to repair and find a solution to them or at least explain them truthfully. But are we right in our perception of science? Is science really that powerful or are we mistaken in attributing such power to science? Do we really understand science both as a discipline and as a practice or have we been taken-in by some kind of myth that surrounds science? These are some of the questions that arise concerning science and we can unravel them and further our understanding of science by applying our critical thinking tools in evaluating the myths and realities of science.

What is Science?

The colossal nature of science and its overwhelming impact on everyday life has made it difficult for most people to really appreciate what science is. What is clear is that the vast majority of people look upon science positively and are more receptive to conceptions of science that corroborate this positive view of science. Thus science is sometimes looked upon as consisting of knowledge that is proven, as opposed to knowledge from some other disciplines which is considered to be either unproven or merely speculative. There is also the popular idea that scientific theories are derived in some rigorous way from the facts of experience, acquired through observation and experiment, thus making science a product of what we see, touch and hear. Again, science is often thought to be insulated from personal opinion and preferences thus making science objective and reliable. These views, which are sometimes collectively referred to as the popular view of science¹ contribute, more than anything else, to

some of the misconceptions about science. The misconceptions about science are not limited to the popular views about science but are also contained in various definitions of science. Such misconceptions occur because people try to define science from certain narrow perspectives, as opposed to capturing a more holistic view of science in their definitions. To truly understand what science is, and in the spirit of the open-mindedness that characterises Critical Thinking, it is important to be aware of such misconceptions so as to guard against subscribing to any one of them.

Perhaps the best way to understand science and the misconceptions that are sometimes associated with it is to follow John Ziman's step by step analysis of what science is and what it is not.² The first thing to keep in mind is that science is not something esoteric, but rather is an artificial creation by human beings in their attempt to understand reality. What this means is that science is not reality but is merely one way of understanding reality. This also means that scientific opinion is not necessarily the right opinion about events in the world but merely one way of interpreting such events. This notwithstanding, it is also important to recognise that there are certain practices and ideals that are uniquely scientific and which thus help to distinguish science from other human activities. The first of such distinguishing factors is that, although human beings generally try to understand and thereby explain reality, the attempt by the scientist to do so is distinctive in several ways. Firstly, the scientist attempts to explain the workings of the world in a systematic way. Thus, whereas a priest can explain the recent frequency of natural disasters as God's anger at the hedonistic lifestyle of the present generation, the scientist has to be more exact in explaining such events. A scientific explanation of such an event must connect the cause to the effect, following processes that make the relationship apparent to anyone with the same kind of training or expertise. What this means is that the scientist must possess certain technical skills, and employ specific tools and methods, in arriving at any explanation. Thus, compared to religion and many other human activities, science is rigorous, methodical, academic, logical and practical. It has its own technical language and operates within a definable scope.

The next step in understanding the misconceptions that are sometimes associated with science is to look at what Ziman presents as inadequate definitions of science and try to understand why such definitions are inadequate. One such is that *Science is the mastery of man's environment*. The problem with this definition is that it confuses science with the product of science, namely, technology. Although technology, as a product of science, is the most visible aspect of science, it does not define science since science consists of much more than its product. Again, technological innovation is usually the end of a long process of scientific activity and is sometimes

¹See A. F. Chalmers, *What is this Thing Called Science?* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1980), 1

²John Ziman "What is Science?" in *Introductory Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, eds. E. D. Klemke, Robert Hollinger and A. David Kline (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1980), 35 – 54.

held to be less important than the preceding understanding of the theoretical rules that govern the technical innovation. Another definition considered by Ziman is the view that science is the *study of the material world*. This definition is deficient because the study of science sometimes goes beyond the material world. Mathematics, for instance, which is an important component of science, does not deal with the material world but is rather used to measure and describe the relationships that are attributed to objects and events within the material world. This definition is also inappropriate for such social science disciplines as Sociology and Psychology, because the two disciplines do not study material things but rather deal with non-material events and processes that arise from human interactions with the environment. Again, Ziman considers the attempt to define science as the *experimental method* and observes that such an attempt leaves the concept of science incomplete because it will leave out such important components of science as Pure Mathematics, Astronomy and Geology, which do not use the experimental method. This is not to say that experiments do not play an important role in science, rather, it involves saying that the experimental method is not the defining characteristic of science. It is important to note that it is not easy to define science and that most scholars simply adopt one of the above definitions of science or something akin to it. Thus, as critical thinkers, when we are confronted with any definition of science, we should always ask ourselves whether such a definition is sufficiently inclusive and whether it touches on the important attributes of science.

Another way that Ziman suggests can help us to understand science is to find out what science is *not*, by distinguishing it from *non-science*. Like any other discipline, science is a system of ideas, but what distinguishes science from non-science is that scientists strive for a consensus, whereas the other disciplines do not. In law, for instance, the need to ensure fairness and to treat equally everyone who comes before the courts makes it imperative that legal decisions be systematised and that judgements are based on an unambiguous interpretation of the law in accordance with legal precedents. To this extent, law is like science in striving for some form of consensus. The similarity between them becomes even more vivid when we consider that both disciplines usually focus on contentious theories and both emphasise the importance of *evidence* in arriving at acceptable judgements. Again, both disciplines understand evidence to be “any information that is relevant to a disputed hypothesis” and emphasise the credibility of the evidence while making allowance for honest error. The difference between them consists in the fact that we withhold judgement when scientific evidence is in conflict, whereas judgements are usually arrived at when there is a conflict in legal evidence.

The definition of science in the above section follows a critical thinking approach. It starts by probing different possibilities, thus illustrating the *open-minded* character of critical thinkers. Evaluating the different definitions of science demonstrates the *analytic* character of critical thinkers, while the comparison of science with law illustrates the importance of *practical evidence* in critical thinking. Thus, in using critical thinking to look at science, we should keep in mind that there are several myths and misconceptions surrounding science and that, as critical thinkers, we should not pas-

sively imbibe such myths, but rather should interrogate them with a view to arriving at the truth about science.

Method in Science

One of the common beliefs about science is that it uncovers truths about nature and that these truths are embodied in the physical laws that have been uncovered by science. The activities of scientists give the impression that, in the natural world, the relationships between objects, as well as the events occurring in the process of such relationships, are governed by certain natural laws which control and regulate the interaction between them. This view contends that such natural laws can be discovered through the scientific method of observing nature and drawing appropriate inferences from such observations. The implications of this view are that:

- Natural Laws exist and have always existed.
- Natural Laws predate science and therefore do not depend on the activities of scientists.
- Natural laws are discoverable.
- Science has the capacity to decode nature and obtain such laws.

The myth in the above is that it is possible to relate scientific laws to natural laws. The reasons why this is regarded as a myth are that:

The postulation made concerning Natural Laws is merely conjectural, thus the view that the universe is governed by laws does not represent any proven reality. Although we do observe certain regularities in nature, we also sometimes observe distinct variations from such regularities. For instance, although the seasons appear to be fairly stable, we sometimes witness un-seasonal weather conditions and other events that actually subvert the orderliness in nature. Thus, focusing on the regularities in order to arrive at the conclusion that nature is governed by laws appears selective and contrived. Even if such laws exist, it is not evident that they are discoverable by science, since we can never know when and if such laws have been discovered. Thus scientific laws are not the same as and do not represent natural laws.

A view that is commonly held by both scientists and philosophers is that scientists arrive at their laws by mere projections of human reason into natural phenomena. This is why the projections do not stand the test of time but are often revised when the thinking that informed such projections change.

Although Scientific Laws are wont to change, the natural phenomena on which they are based do not change and, presumably, the Laws of Nature that are mimicked by scientific law do not change. For instance, it is a fact of nature that when we leave something unsupported in the atmosphere, it falls to the ground. Although this phenomenon has, for a long time, been explained by scientists by 'gravitation', the way it has been expressed and the way the human intellect understands it have been changing. At one point it was simply expressed as "anything that goes up must come down"

and later it was expressed in a more complex way, namely, “anything that is left unsupported in the atmosphere falls towards the centre of the earth.” All of these points show that there is a wide gap separating scientific laws and natural laws and that we cannot equate the one with the other. It is clear, therefore, that Natural Law is something nebulous, something that may or may not have an existence, something which even if it exists we are not certain about, and cannot characterize even when we claim to feel its effect on a regular basis.

Positing the Laws of Nature entails subscribing to determinism: the view that every event in the world is predetermined. If it is true that the Laws of Nature exist, then everything would be operating according to such laws – deviations from such laws would be impossible. But, as we have noticed from time to time, such deviations do occur; sometimes with such regularity as to suggest that there may be no fixed laws of nature. Also, developments in Physics have uncovered ‘the fact’ that a measure of indeterminacy usually accompanies natural events. According to Ridley, “some of these events are mechanical (such as the weather) electrical (such as the semiconductor that exhibits that wild departure from Ohm’s Law, known as negative differential resistance) or magnetohydrodynamic (such as those plasma instabilities that frustrate the achievement of nuclear fusion and the goal of unlimited energy).”³ Ridley thus maintains that in the domain of non-linear dynamics the world is represented as unstable and lawless, quite opposed to the rule-governed universe of determinism. But even where it does appear to be a case of ‘cause and effect’ in non-linear dynamics, Ridley maintains that it is almost impossible to predict how the system will evolve. Events such as those described above within the domain of non-linear dynamics do not only impact on the deterministic credentials of Natural Law but also have implications for science. One such implication is that we can no longer refer to any science as exact since science as we know it “produces different kinds of knowledge with various levels of understanding and varying degrees of predictability”. Thus, whereas science can predict the exact time of an eclipse, it cannot predict an earthquake or a volcanic eruption. Even such events as hurricanes that can be predicted are only partially determined since scientists cannot accurately predict their strength or behaviour. Therefore, rather than be concerned with predictability, scientists are now more concerned with stability and regularity as being the hallmarks of science. But what are the laws of science and how are they arrived at?

The Inductive Method

For a long time, the inductive method has been acknowledged as the method of science. Francis Bacon, for instance, identified the ideal method of science as “that which will dismiss all prejudices and misconceptions and proceed by close and methodic observation of fact”. This involved examining the relevant details concerning a particular subject matter and abstracting from those details certain regularities that could be formulated into scientific laws. Bacon was actually stating a method that had already been popularized by Copernicus and endorsed by Kepler and Galileo. Thus the

³B. K. Ridley, *On Science* (London: Routledge, 2001), 126.

inductive method was not only considered as the method of science but was actually the primary engine of the scientific revolution. The inductive method became very popular during the scientific revolution because it emphasises observation, which was important for the discoveries of Copernicus and other early scientists. This method starts by positing many statements that describe observations of nature and progresses with the goal of finding a few powerful statements about how nature works. It is this method that helped to uncover what Kepler refers to as the “ordered regularity of nature” and led to his three laws of planetary motion.

Universal truths such as are discoverable through the process of induction are very important, not only in science but also in everyday life. This is because it helps us to understand our world, not only by understanding the regularities of nature but also in terms of evaluating less universal statements. For example, we could infer the truth of the less universal statement that ‘All Batswana are Black’ from the more universal statements that ‘All Africans are black’ and ‘All Batswana are Africans’. In other words, once we know that Batswana are Africans and Africans are Black, we can easily conclude that Batswana are black. All of this is possible because we already know the truth of the universal statements. But how do we arrive at these universal statements? We arrive at these statements through the process of induction. An inductive argument is one in which the mind proceeds from the truth of particular statements about a thing or state of affairs to the truth of a universal statement about the same thing or class of things. In other words, from observing the truth about particular instances of a thing or event, we assume that the universal statement that represents that thing or event is also true. For example,

The Xhosa are Africans and they are black.
 The Zulus are Africans and they are black.
 The Shona are Africans and they are black.
 The Luba are Africans and they are black.
 The Ibibio are Africans and they are black.
 The Ashanti are Africans and they are black.
 All other African peoples that I have come across are black.
 Therefore, all Africans are black.

In the above example, the universal statement is ‘All Africans are black’, whereas the particular statements are the ones preceding it and we affirm this universal statement because we trust the particular statements to be true. It is through the same process that we arrive at the statement that ‘all Batswana are Africans’:

The Kalanga are Batswana and they are Africans.
 The San are Batswana and they are Africans.
 The Bakwena are Batswana and they are Africans.
 The Barolong are Batswana and they are Africans.
 The Tawana are Batswana and they are Africans.

The Bangwaketse are Batswana and they are Africans.
The Bakgatla are Batswana and they are Africans.
Therefore, All Batswana are Africans.

The Process of induction is sometimes referred to as a generalisation because we make a general statement out of our experiences concerning particular statements. It is important to note that generalisations are not done in an arbitrary manner. For instance, it is not acceptable for one to make generalisations when one has not observed sufficient instances of an event or thing. One cannot, for instance, conclude that 'all policemen are cowards' by simply observing the behaviour of ten policemen who refused to confront a criminal gang that was threatening the lives of residents. This is because the police force is made up of thousands of personnel and it is inappropriate to generalise concerning the behaviour of all of them based on our observation of the actions of ten. For a generalisation to be adequate, one is required to observe sufficient instances of an event, or thing. A generalisation that is based on insufficient evidence is referred to as a *hasty generalisation* and is considered to be a mistake in reasoning or fallacy of argument. But when is a generalisation based on adequate evidence? In other words, how can someone know when an appropriate number of instances of a thing or event have been observed to warrant a generalisation?

There is really no hard and fast rule and the reason for this is that situations from which we generalise are different. In one instance of generalisation, we observe that every time in the past that the Botswana Pula has been devalued, the prices of things in the country go up. From this we can generalise that 'devaluing the Pula always results in price increases'. In this example, our generalisation is based on all past instances of devaluation but the substance of the claim in the general statement covers all future instances of devaluation. This is considered an appropriate generalisation because all instances of the event have been considered. But we cannot observe all instances of the event in all cases. Sometimes, the number of instances involved are too many and beyond our reach. For instance, in making the general statement that 'all cattle are herbivores' we cannot observe the feeding behaviour of all cattle. The generalisation is made from the cattle that we have observed. The argument in this case goes as follows:

All the cattle that have been observed by man are herbivores.
Therefore all cattle are herbivores.

In some other cases, the number of instances used in making the generalisation may be even less. Consider the generalisation often made in the quality control department of a manufacturing plant. The plant produces 20,000 units of the product but in checking for defects, quality control randomly examines 10 units of the product and then concludes that the batch of 20,000 is acceptable. This is a situation where we are generalising about 20,000 units of a thing, based on our examination of ten units. But although this might look like a very small sample of the whole, we should understand that it is not

only the sample that has contributed to our conclusion about the 20,000 but also our knowledge of the production process. We know for instance that the whole batch of cream produced that day was mixed in the same cauldron and that the ten randomly chosen units are representative of the cauldron as a whole.

In making acceptable generalisations, it is important that there be no exceptions to the rule. In other words, if we make the generalisation that all cattle are herbivores, it is important that we do not overlook the isolated cattle-post in Selebi Phikwe that has been reported to have carnivorous cattle. If such cattle exist, then the basis of our generalisation has been weakened. Also, our generalisation should cover all breeds of cattle to be acceptable. Thus if we overlook the 'Kenyan Masai thick hoof' breed of cattle, our generalisation is further weakened.

In referring to the correctness or incorrectness of an inductive argument we have to be careful because the truth of an inductive argument cannot be conclusively determined. In an inductive argument we say that even if the *reasons* are true, the conclusion that is drawn from those reasons cannot conclusively be true. This is because the truth of the enumerated instances does not guarantee the truth of the conclusion. The reasons merely make the conclusion *probable*. That is, the reasons merely make it likely that the claim is true. For example, although we can make the claim that 'all trees have green leaves' because all the trees that we have seen have green leaves, we cannot make that claim conclusively because there is a possibility that a tree that we have not seen exists somewhere and does not have green leaves. There is also the possibility that evolution can create a situation where in the future we have trees that have blue leaves. Given this, all we can say for certain is that 'it is probably true that all trees have green leaves'.

The Fallacy of Induction

It is clear that inductive arguments cannot give us certainty but only give us probable truth. What this means is that when we arrive at the conclusion of an inductive argument, there is no guarantee that the general statement will remain true. For instance, consider the following argument, which is arrived at after careful observation of nature:

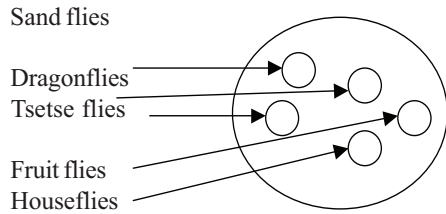
All living things that *humans have observed* respond to stimuli.
Therefore all living things respond to stimuli.

Despite the fact that all living things that have been observed in the above argument respond to stimuli, there is no guarantee that the general statement that 'all living things respond to stimuli' is true.

Although inductive generalisations have proved to be useful, certain problems have been identified with the inductive method. A particular philosopher named David Hume argued that inductive reasoning is not rational because we cannot see how the claim follows from the reasons. As a case in point, in the following example no matter how many flies we observe to be dangerous, there can never be a guarantee that the

next fly that we come across will also be dangerous.

The sand fly is dangerous.
 Logic and Critical Thinking
 The dragonfly is dangerous.
 The tsetse fly is dangerous.
 The housefly is dangerous.
 The fruit fly is dangerous
 Therefore, all flies are dangerous



As shown in the diagram, the different types of flies have been observed to be dangerous but there is nothing to show that flies as a collective species are dangerous. The conclusion that all flies are dangerous is made even more improbable when it is clear that it was an inductive process that was used in arriving at the claim of the enumerated instances. For instance, in arriving at the claim that houseflies are dangerous, we have to observe particular instances of houseflies posing a danger to humans. But the fact that the different flies that we have known are dangerous does not guarantee that there are no flies somewhere that are not dangerous. There is also no guarantee that flies will continue to be dangerous. Even as we make the argument, a mutation process may be underway which may produce flies that are not dangerous. A fallacy is commonly regarded as an error in reasoning, thus the fallacy of induction would refer to errors in inductive reasoning. As shown above, the primary error in inductive reasoning is that it gives the illusion that the reasons support the conclusion whereas the support that it provides does not guarantee the truth of the conclusion. Hume concludes from the above that since the inductive argument is the method of science, science is based on a non-rational foundation.

Apart from his argument that in an inductive argument we cannot see how the conclusion follows from the premises (reasons), Hume also has other arguments against induction. He argues, for instance, that the only justification for induction is induction itself. In other words, what makes induction acceptable is that the more cases we observe, the greater the chance that future cases will be the same. But this begs the question because the conclusion of the argument (that induction is reliable) is that what we want to verify is the same as the reasons that have been used in the justification.

But this apart, no matter how accurate an inductive generalisation may have been in the past as a guide to the future, it cannot guarantee that future experiences of the same event will be the same. Indeed, many generalisations that have been made in the past have turned out to be false.

One of the problems of induction that Hume identifies is the problem of projection. This problem involves saying that the future will always resemble the past and that a generalisation that is based on past experiences will remain valid for future experiences. According to Hume, there is no rational basis for supposing that past correlations will be valid for the future because there is no necessary connection between any two events. He maintains that we project the correlation between two

events because their relationship in the past has encouraged us to form the habit of expecting them to appear together in the future. He argues that rather than existing in a necessary relationship the correlated events are merely in a relationship of *constant conjunction*.

Another problem of inductive generalisations is that we sometimes accord a higher epistemic value to some generalisations than to others, even when all of them are arrived at through the same process of observation and abstraction. Consider the following generalisations:

Everything that goes up must come down.
The rich always exploit the poor.

The first type of generalisation is usually considered to be a legitimate inductive generalisation whereas those of the second type are regarded as illegitimate. Thus whereas generalisations such as the first, above, could be said to express the laws of nature, those such as in the second cannot be so described even though both are arrived at through the process of induction.

Science and Rationality

In rejecting induction, it follows that science is irrational because it is based on a poor foundation. This view has elicited reactions from scientific theorists who either agree or disagree with Hume. One of those who agree is Nelson Goodman, who argues that those who defend induction merely describe the process without showing that it is rational. Karl Popper also subscribes to Hume's view that the inductive argument is invalid, but believes that this invalidity does not give sufficient grounds for saying that science is based on a non-rational foundation. This, according to him, is because we do not arrive at the laws of science through an inductive process. To explain his position, he makes a distinction between "the bucket theory of knowledge" and the "searchlight theory of knowledge." For him, subscribing to the view that science proceeds inductively is to subscribe to 'the bucket theory of knowledge.' By this theory, what the scientist does is to engage in mindless observation with the hope of finding regularities in nature that could be formulated into a scientific law. By this theory, the scientist is not looking for anything specific but is making a general observation and filing away observed correlations. Popper argues that no viable scientific law could result from such a generalised search for information. He argues that given the success of science, there must be some other method through which science proceeds.

In arguing for an alternative method, Popper observes that the work of the scientist is goal directed because scientific research serves a specific purpose, which is not attainable through general observations. It is this specificity of goals that pushes the scientist to pursue a certain line of research that is likely to lead to an anticipated result. It is this goal directedness that is objectified in the name, "searchlight theory of knowledge." What the scientist does is to beam his searchlight in a particular direction with the purpose of illuminating the particular subject matter. Thus, rather than use the

inductive method, Popper maintains that the method of science is actually the hypothetico-deductive method, which progresses as follows:

- Deduce a consequence
- Through experiments and observations, verify whether or not the consequence occurs
- If the consequence does not occur then the hypothesis must be false and should be replaced
- If the consequence occurs then the hypothesis has been corroborated and to further corroborate it, one should deduce further consequences and repeat the verification process.

Popper refers to this process as ‘conjectures and refutations’, which involves constructing a hypothesis and then trying to refute it. A good example of how the process of conjectures and refutations work is evident in the work of the French scientist Lavoisier. Lavoisier formulated the hypothesis that a burning substance takes something from the air. In other words, that combustion is not possible in a vacuum. In order to test the hypothesis, Lavoisier deduced that, as a consequence of his hypothesis, if a substance is burnt and no part of it escapes during the burning process, then the substance should weigh more after the burning than it did prior to being burnt. As part of his test of the hypothesis, Lavoisier burnt mercury in a controlled environment that prevented the escape of any part of the mercury during the burning process and then weighed the remaining ash (clax). His hypothesis was confirmed to be true when the ash weighed more than the original mercury that was heated. In this case, the conjecture was not refuted, but was rather confirmed.

It should be borne in mind that confirming a hypothesis such as that above is not an indication that the hypothesis has been conclusively established. Even hypotheses that have been consistently confirmed by experiments and have, on that basis, been used for various research projects cannot be said to be true. The reason for this, as Popper points out, is that the hypothetico-deductive (or the conjectures and refutations) method is based on a conditional statement of the form:

If the hypothesis is correct, then the consequence will be realised.

The problem with this type of statement is that whereas we can conclusively falsify it using a hypothetical syllogism, we cannot conclusively confirm it hypothetically. In other words, whereas we can validly make the following argument:

If the hypothesis is correct, then the consequence will be realized
 The consequence is not realised
 Therefore the hypothesis is not true
 We cannot validly make this other one:

If the hypothesis is correct then the consequence will be realised

The consequence is realised.

Therefore the hypothesis is correct.

The reason we cannot conclusively confirm this second argument is because, whereas the hypothesis is a condition for the consequence, the consequence is not a condition for the hypothesis. In other words, the consequence can occur even when the hypothesis is not correct, as would happen when the consequence occurs as a result of some other reason. For instance, in the Lavoisier experiment, the clax could become heavier not because it takes in something in the air while burning but because it bonds with particles of the container in which it was burnt. Arguments such as in the second syllogism above are said to be fallacious and to commit the syllogistic fallacy of *affirming the consequent*. Faced with a situation where the occurrence of the consequence could be explained in some other way, what scientists do is to use the same process of conjecture and refutation to eliminate rival hypotheses. In the above case, one of the rival hypotheses would be that “particles of the container combine with the mercury in the process of burning to make the clax heavier.” The consequence of this will be that the container will weigh less than it did prior to the burning since it has lost something in the process. If, however, the weight of the container remains the same, then the hypothesis has been falsified, thus strengthening our faith in the hypothesis that “the mercury combines with air in the burning process”. The elimination of every new rival hypothesis makes the initial hypothesis stronger.

An important feature of scientific hypotheses, which becomes evident in the above example, and which Popper is also at pains to point out, is that scientific hypotheses are deliberately constructed in a specific and categorical manner so that they can be easily verified through the process of *falsification*. Popper maintains that it is the high empirical content of scientific hypotheses that makes them easy to falsify. It is this falsifiability that helps us to distinguish science from non-science. According to Popper, such religious claims as “Jesus is the son of God” have very low empirical content and are therefore not easy to verify. For instance, we cannot say whether or not the statement is true because the subjects of the claim are not extant objects and their relationship cannot be verified. In other words, such statements are difficult to falsify because nothing qualifies as evidence against them. Thus religion, and other inexact disciplines like astrology, whose statements are not easily falsifiable are, by this standard, not scientific.

It should be understood that the distinction that Popper makes between science and non-science using this method does not stop with disciplines that we traditionally recognise as non-scientific, but also extends to some disciplines of the social sciences. For instance, the Marxist statement that “all ideological disputes are the expression of a class conflict” can be shown by the falsifiability principle to be unscientific. In the same way, the psychoanalytic statement that “every dream is a wish fulfilment” is also unscientific. The reason is that we cannot specify the conditions under which these statements would be false. Even when certain falsifying evidence has

been adduced, it is always possible to reinterpret the falsifying evidence in such a way that it do not apply to the theory.

But there are some problems with Popper's characterisation of science. First, it does not appear that he has been able to show that science does not proceed inductively. Although he is correct in rejecting the bucket theory of knowledge (i.e. the idea that science collects its data at random), it does not necessarily follow from this that science does not proceed inductively. This is because scientists do not adopt their hypotheses at random. The choice of a scientific hypothesis usually depends on what scientific hypotheses had worked in the past. For instance, the following could never be adopted by science as an hypothesis:

The life force in mercury leaves it when it is heated and this causes it to be heavy.

The reason for not selecting this type of scientific hypothesis is because, from experience, it has been determined that hypotheses of this nature do not work. In other words, the idea that a scientific hypothesis should have a high empirical content was arrived at inductively and, to this extent, induction still plays an important role in the process of science. Or, as another example, consider the case of Isaac Newton. Before choosing the hypothesis that later became the law of gravity, he must have watched countless things falling when they were left unsupported in the atmosphere. If he had only observed one apple falling, it might not have left an impression on him. Thus, in formulating his hypothesis he must have been aided by these several instances of things falling.

Another problem that has been identified with Popper's falsification principle is that it is too simple. Following his method of conjectures and refutations, any hypothesis that is not confirmed through the test of its consequence should be discarded. But, in reality, this does not happen in science. It is only when the scientist finds a more suitable assumption to replace the unconfirmed one that the hypothesis is discarded. For if we posit the hypothesis that "burning substances takes something from the air," and, in a bid to confirm this we perform the Lavoisier experiment but find that the resultant clax is not heavier than the mercury that was burnt, the scientist will not immediately discard the hypothesis. On the contrary, the normal procedure is for the scientist to try and discover why the hypothesis has not been confirmed and in so doing seek an alternative explanation for the non-confirmation of the hypothesis.

Perhaps part of the substance inadvertently escaped during the burning.
Perhaps the burning process was faulty – there was not enough heat, etc.
Perhaps the instrument used in measuring the clax is faulty.
Perhaps there is a force acting on the measuring instrument to disturb its reading.

In other words, before an hypothesis is falsified we have to rule out the possibility that the data collected in the process of the study had been mishandled, confirm that the specimen that was studied was not adulterated and that the technique used in the study

was not faulty, and check that other theoretical assumptions that support the hypothesis are accurate. Also, as has been shown by Thomas Kuhn,⁴ scientists do not reject theories because there is a better alternative, neither do they easily accept new theories even when it has a better explanatory power than other existing theories.

Popper has also been criticised for adopting the falsifiability principle as a basis for distinguishing between science and non-science. For instance, it has been argued that the principle is so general that it would exclude scientific principles that are widely accepted as functional scientific principles. One of such principles is Darwin's theory of evolution which holds that it is only species that are well-adapted to their environment that survive the process of evolution. It has been argued that this principle is not falsifiable as the process of falsifying it will involve searching for species that survive the process of evolution despite not being well-adapted to their environment. This is because it will be impossible to find such a creature since its survival will indeed be an indication that it is well-adapted to its environment. What this example shows is that there are certain principles that are by nature non-falsifiable and cannot therefore be covered by Popper's principle.

Science and Value

The primary question concerning the relationship between science and value is whether or not issues of value arise in science. Most scholars agree that there is some relationship between science and value. The problem has always been in determining the extent of such relationship. A common opinion is that science is only concerned with facts (i.e. what is) and is never concerned with norms (i.e. what ought to be). This means that the relationship between science and value is limited to value issues that arise concerning the product of science, that is, ethical disputes that arise concerning the use of science and its products. Such scholars maintain that disputes of this nature are inevitable due to the interactions between science and society. Thus, since science takes place within society, and the products of science are consumed by society, it is inevitable that social values are brought to bear on the products of science and vice versa. It is such interaction between science and society that generates ethical discussions concerning such scientific issues as genetic engineering, cloning, behaviour control, nuclear waste, high tension cabling, the use of human beings in scientific experimentation, and so on. These are ethical issues that arise concerning the product of science and, to this extent, most scholars are willing to accept that there is a relationship between science and value.

Let us take a typical case concerning the burning of fossil fuels. Fossil fuels such as coal and petroleum products play a vital role in everyday economy. Fossil fuels are used to generate electricity and to power motor vehicles, ships, planes and trains. There is no doubt that the lives of people have been made easier by the burning of fossil fuels and that the world would have been a lot more difficult to live in without

⁴Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

these things. But the burning of fossil fuels also has an enormous negative impact on the environment. The primary by-product in the burning of fossil fuels is carbon monoxide, which pollutes the air, thus causing breathing difficulties, acid rain, global warming and its associated problems of climate change, etc. The dilemma is that human society needs the energy from fossil fuels to sustain its current level of comfort and growth but at the same time has to contend with apocalyptic disasters that may result from it. There are different angles to the dispute. While some suggest that it is immoral for western countries to continue enjoying their current level of comfort while creating global climatic problems – which affect poor people in third world countries that have no access to such comforts – there are others who argue that it is the level of comfort in the west that enables them to provide aid and emergency assistance to people in third world countries. They also suggest that tinkering with that level of comfort will not only be injurious to people in the west but also to people in third world countries, the very people such tinkering was meant to serve. There are others who argue that there are several non-essential uses of the burning of fossil fuels which could be eliminated without seriously affecting the basic comfort of people in the West. Examples of such are the use of individual motorised transport instead of public transport, the use of short hub air travel instead of cleaner alternatives like electric trains, and the demand for exotic holiday destinations rather than local destinations that do not involve much travel. These are everyday issues that affect all of us and they constitute some of the ethical problems arising from the use of scientific products.

An ethical problem that relates specifically to us in Africa is the disposal of nuclear waste. There is no doubt that nuclear energy is very important as a cleaner alternative to fossil fuels. Its processes, however, produce radioactive waste which is also injurious to human life and the environment. Due to stringent laws concerning the reprocessing and disposal of nuclear waste in the West, some African countries have been paid large sums of money to accept such waste in their countries. Countries such as Niger have very large unpopulated areas of land and very little in the way of natural resources for development. They argue that the money accruing from the receiving and storage of nuclear waste from European countries can be used for development, and that citizens will not be adversely affected because there is sufficient space to allow the waste to be stored well away from human populations. Some even argue that the processes of nature could, in the future, turn such waste into highly sought-after materials, which can be resold for profit. On the other hand, there are people who argue that the long-term impact of such waste cannot be compared with the paltry financial inducements that are offered to countries that accept them. For instance, the containers in which the waste is stored could be damaged, thus exposing both people and nature to radioactivity. Again, the waste may leak into the underground water reserves and poison the source of potable water for most of the citizens. But the more persuasive argument is that if the waste is harmless, or there is a possibility that something good might come out of it, the western countries that dump it in Africa would not have been so eager to throw it away.

The above examples show that there is usually a healthy ethical debate concern-

ing the products and by-products of science. Scholars generally agree that such debates show that there is an intimate relationship between science and value. There is, however, no such agreement concerning the role that value plays within the internal processes of science. It is such a role that is usually referred to when people say that science is value free or value neutral. But what does it mean to say that science is value neutral? What kind of value do we refer to when we say that science is value neutral? Are we, for instance, referring to moral value or a more material value? Irrespective of the answers we give to the above questions, can we actually say that science is value free? These are some of the questions that arise concerning the notion that science is value free and, as critical thinkers, it is important for us to examine them closely and familiarise ourselves with the answers to them that have been offered by scientists and philosophers.

What does it mean to say that science is value free or value neutral? What is usually meant by this is that personal and societal values play no role within the process of science. This means that science is free from the emotional and personal whims of the scientist, as well as from the moral, aesthetic and religious values of the culture within which a certain scientific development takes place. For instance, the Americans and the Indians follow the same processes in making their atomic bombs, despite the cultural difference between them and the personal differences between the Indian scientist and the American scientist. This is sometimes pointed to as an indication that science is objective, systematic and precise in a way that objects of value are not. Again, the success of science in explaining natural events and in helping humans to control nature helps to define it as free of personal and social values. The thinking behind this is that values are subjective and therefore change from person to person. The success of science, on the other hand, could not have happened in an environment where values change and individuals pursue their personal or cultural interests. Thus the only way to explain the phenomenal success of science is to posit that science is value free. This implies that science cannot be objective if it is associated with values, and since we already know science to be very successful, it must be value free. As critical thinkers, we cannot simply accept this position without question. We are expected to interrogate this view and strive to separate the facts about it from fiction.

Ethical Problems at the Preliminary Stage of Scientific Research

Our quest to determine whether or not science is value-free will follow the ideas of Nicholas Rescher⁵ on the subject. Rescher argues that ethical problems arise at various points in the process of science and that it is misleading to say that science is value free. He argues that a research institution is, first and foremost, a product of society, which has its own ideas as to what is right or wrong. It is the values of the society that determine whether or not research institutions should be involved in re-

⁵Nicholas Rescher, "The Ethical Dimensions of Scientific Research," in *Beyond the Edge of Certainty: Essays in Contemporary Science and Philosophy*, ed. Robert G. Colony (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965), 261-275

search and also the type of research they should be involved in. For instance, the Manhattan Project of the United States government which resulted in the first atomic bomb, grew out of the paramount value of the United States at the time of the second world war. A pacifist nation like Switzerland could never have initiated such a project because its value system is at cross-purposes with the kind of values that would necessitate an atomic weapons' programme. On the other hand, stem-cell research is suffering because the United States federal government refuses to fund such research because the influential people in government feel that it is morally wrong to do so. Similarly, an African country may decide that it is not right to establish a nuclear research facility when thousands of its citizens live below the poverty line. What this shows is that the attitude towards science and technology, including the provision of the enabling infrastructure for scientific development and research, depends on what each society considers to be right or wrong. Thus values play an important role in the decision-making process that promotes or retards the development of science.

Rescher goes further, and discusses the ethical problems that nations, institutions and individuals have in the choice of research goals. Due to competing demands, national budgets are not usually sufficient for all the things that need to be done in a country. Thus an ethical issue arises as to whether it is right to spend money on scientific research, which may or may not be fruitful in the future, when the injection of such revenue into the health or education system would serve the people well. Botswana, for instance, has a lot of coal deposits and could easily exploit them for power generation. If Botswana decides to pursue costly nuclear technology instead, an ethical issue might arise as to why that money is to be spent on nuclear research when there are more pressing humanitarian issues like HIV & AIDS, orphan care and relief of the destitute.

The same type of moral dilemma arises for a research institution that has limited funds but many research commitments. It may have to decide whether to spend its limited funds on research into a vaccine for flu, which brings discomfort to a lot of people but is fatal to few, mostly the elderly, or spend the same money on research into a particular strain of meningitis which has never occurred in our hypothetical country but if it does ever come could be fatal to a lot of people. In other words, the institute has to decide whether to spend the money and make people comfortable or spend it in preparation for an eventuality which may never arise but if it did could spell disaster for the country.

An individual researcher may also be confronted with a dilemma concerning the choices that he needs to make concerning the type of research he should go into. Should he join a research team that is working on armaments for the military and aims to produce weapons that could kill a lot of innocent people, and where he would be very well-paid, or should he join a research team that doesn't get paid so much but is trying to produce a golf club with a heightened level of accuracy? The same type of dilemma may arise for a scientist concerning stem-cell research. Should he be involved in the destruction of human embryos even if such destruction holds out the hope for a cure for cancer and Parkinson's disease? What these examples show is that

rather than being value free, ethical decisions are very common for each of the major players involved in the initiation of research.

Ethical Problems and the Process of Scientific Research

Although the process of science appears to be objective, systematic and precise a lot of problems confront the scientist in the course of normal scientific activity. One of the more common problems has to do with the method, especially where there is more than one method of research and there are undesirable outcomes associated with some of the methods. For instance, a researcher may have to decide whether to use embryonic stem cells in a research project and, in the process, destroy viable embryos, or to use some other research method that may not hold as much promise but does not involve sacrificing a viable foetus. Also, given the enormous risks involved in human experimentation, a researcher is often confronted with the dilemma of whether or not to work with human subjects or follow an alternative method of research. Apart from the above, even the use of animals in scientific research also raises a lot of questions, especially as it relates to the level of suffering that these animals undergo in the cause of the experiment. In the social sciences, especially in psychology, researchers have to be careful that their methods do not compromise human dignity and that the integrity of the human subject in the research is not compromised.

Ethical problems also arise for the scientist concerning how much experimentation needs to be done, and how much evidence gathered, before the scientist can declare his/her findings to the scientific community as an established fact. In other words, what standards should the scientist adhere to in establishing a scientific fact? Although, at first glance, this may appear to be a purely methodological question, there are issues of value involved. For instance, a scientist might be tempted to rush an important scientific breakthrough to the press because of the significant nature of the discovery. Thus, rather than go through the laborious process of testing and confirming the results of a study, a scientist might simply take for granted that his initial study was sufficiently thorough. This may happen especially in situations where a lot of money has been expended on the research and there is pressure from the sponsors for results. On the other hand, a researcher may be intimidated by the significance of his findings and thus downplay the results for fear that he might be mistaken. This is especially true of research that poses a risk to human life and well-being where presenting the result in hesitant language might exonerate the researcher from blame in the event of something going wrong.

The purpose of scientific research is to extend the frontiers of human knowledge and, to a large extent, this requires co-operation from every section of the scientific community. This is because information that is held by a section of the scientific community may be pivotal to a scientific breakthrough that may benefit the whole of mankind. However, it is common for researchers and laboratories to hoard vital research information or share it in a preferential way. This happens even in situations where such research information is not classified or of paramount importance to the security and well-being of any country. There is a tendency for researchers to exclude

some of their colleagues in the field from the results of their work while, at the same time, sharing pre-publication information with other researchers. The problem with this practice is that it denies vital information to other researchers and thereby affects the diversity of information availability in the knowledge pool that is used by researchers for the benefit of people.

There has been a long tradition in science for new information and discoveries to be aligned to existing theories. As has already been shown, this is one of the reasons why the falsification of an hypothesis does not immediately result in the discarding of the hypothesis as this would threaten the existing body of knowledge to which it is aligned. This need to protect the existing corpus of knowledge, as well as to prevent the dissemination of strange and unfamiliar ideas, is partly due to the human tendency to resist unfamiliar ideas. Scientists thus consider it their duty to protect others from what they consider to be a form of misinformation. Although this is a very noble act, it sometimes stifles new ideas and impedes the progress of science. For instance, the groundbreaking idea of an English chemist, J. J. Waterston [1811-1883], on the development of thermodynamics was excluded from the *Proceedings of the Royal Society* because its referees thought the paper was nonsensical. It was only after a period of forty-five years that another scientist, John William Raleigh [1842-1919], discovered the paper and set out to popularise its findings. Here again, when considering the result of new research, scientists often face the dilemma of whether, in rejecting a novel idea, they are actually protecting the corpus of science from corruption or retarding the progress of science.

There are other ethical problems that arise within the process of science and concerning the product of science. Such problems include the allocation of credit for scientific research, the use of research assistants, and so on. What these problems show is that the scientist is not covered in some sort of shroud that protects him/her from issues of value and that indeed value issues are commonplace both in the process and concerning the product of science.

Conclusion

This paper started out as an attempt to subject science to the rigours of critical thinking and to evaluate some of the assumptions and presuppositions that we commonly have of science. The aim was to see the extent to which we are justified in these assumptions and presuppositions and to what extent the colossal power of science in the contemporary world can be justified. The paper did not set out to deride or belittle the achievements of science, but rather to help us as critical thinkers to understand science better and know the limitations that we should expect as we interact with science. It is clear from the paper that most of the views that people have of science are inappropriate and need revising and that, as critical thinkers, we should be at the forefront in properly articulating the nature of science and its role in our society. It has also been clear from our discussions that some of the assumptions that we have about science are myths, which spring up following the success of science, and that we would do well to be wary of them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Introduction to Epistemology

Louis M. Manyeli

Introduction

Philosophy has four main branches, namely, logic, epistemology, metaphysics and ethics. The first three branches are usually described as being speculative, and it is precisely due to their abstractness that novices in philosophy find them hard to understand. This chapter is confined to epistemology. Given that it is a chapter devoted strictly to beginners in philosophy, an attempt will be made to define and explain epistemology in simple terms.

The first part defines and explains epistemology, and presents three questions: What is knowledge, particularly from an epistemological point of view? Is scepticism possible? And how is knowledge obtainable?

The second part pursues the question of whether scepticism is possible. In this discussion, I have restricted myself to Pyrrhonism, Hume and Descartes. I chose Pyrrho because he represents the trend of unmitigated scepticism. Hume is selected as an advocate of mitigated scepticism, and also because he is a source behind modern and post modern religious scepticism. Strictly speaking, Descartes is not a sceptic, but his method of systematic doubt illustrates that scepticism can seriously discourage man's pursuit of knowledge. It is worth noting that while Descartes is a rationalist (one who believes that knowledge is only attainable through reason), Hume is also an empiricist (one who believes that knowledge can only be attained through sense experience).

The third part examines the question of how knowledge is obtained. Philosophers who hold the view that knowledge is obtained through the use of reason are called rationalists. I intend to illustrate the rationalist method using Plato, a prominent classical philosopher who made important contributions to the rationalist mode of knowing. Empiricists, on the other hand, maintain the view that we obtain knowledge through senses. Here I chose to use Locke, a prominent empiricist, as an example of this philosophical trend.

Against Rationalism

Locke's main claim is that all our ideas are derived from experience. In arguing against rationalism I also intend to discuss Ayer's, a twentieth century philosopher whose

logical positivism was inspired by empiricism and verificationism. Whereas Bertrand Russell, another twentieth century philosopher had maintained that the value of philosophy must be sought to a great extent in its uncertainty, Ayer maintained that whatever fails the test of verification is meaningless. This shows that modern science has been greatly influenced by empiricism.

Observation and Experiment

Given that this “Introduction to Epistemology” is written for novices in philosophy, I have chosen classics of epistemology whose understanding will make it easy for new learners to adapt and familiarise themselves with the discipline, and be in a better position to follow what is going on later.

I will conclude the chapter by summarizing all the philosophers discussed, and attempt briefly evaluation their contributions to knowledge.

What is Epistemology?

Etymologically, the term epistemology stems from the Greek word *episteme*, which means “knowledge”. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. It is the science of knowing where we inquire the nature of knowledge. In epistemology we investigate the place of sense-experience in obtaining knowledge and the role played by reason in generating knowledge. It is in this branch of philosophy where we consider the possibility of either moderate or universal scepticism. What makes epistemology a central area of philosophy is its quest for truth? The task of epistemologists is to determine how truth is obtained and justified. They attempt to distinguish true beliefs from false ones. The three epistemological questions that will be considered below are: What is knowledge? Is scepticism possible? How do we obtain knowledge?

What is Knowledge?

Generally, knowledge is an endeavour to understand or comprehend something. In particular, epistemologists are primarily engaged in the search for the truth. Their task is to distinguish truth from falsity. What differentiates philosophy, or more precisely epistemology, from other disciplines in pursuit of the truth is that epistemologists also attempt to *justify* the truth. It also attempts to justify true beliefs as opposed to mere wishful thinking or guesses. So, in as far as epistemology is concerned, knowledge entails the truth.

Is Scepticism Possible?

Sceptics are philosophers who question the credibility of either sense-experience or reason to assist us knowing anything. They do not plead ignorance about knowing objective reality, but rather doubt the possibility of acquiring or obtaining knowledge. More precisely, scepticism is “the theory that we do not have any knowledge or at least that we do not know most of the things we claim to know”.¹ Scepticism may be

¹L. Pojman, *Philosophy: The Pursuit of Wisdom* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 142.

divided into moderate and absolute scepticism. On the one hand, moderate scepticism holds that we cannot completely justify the things we claim to know. On the other hand, absolute scepticism claims that we cannot know anything. This extreme view of scepticism also claims that we do not know that we do not know.

How Do We Obtain Knowledge?

We have seen that knowledge is about acquiring the truth. Now the question is: how do we obtain this knowledge? Or, rather, what tool should we deploy to acquire knowledge of the truth? Epistemologists who maintain the view that we obtain knowledge through the use of reason are usually referred to as rationalists; while those who hold that it is through the use of the senses that knowledge is obtained are called empiricists. Some philosophers have resorted to taking the middle way, attempting to reconcile rationalism with empiricism, and thus holding that it is through both senses and reason that we obtain knowledge. If they posit more emphasis on reason, they are called rationalists; if they put more stress on sense-experience, they are classified as empiricists. In the first section I will confine myself to a prominent classic rationalist in epistemology.

Scepticism

I have already defined sceptics as those who doubt the credibility of either the senses or reason to obtain knowledge. I will confine myself to three variations of scepticism as evident in three classic sceptic philosophers: Pyrrho, David Hume, and Descartes. Pyrrho of Elis (c. 365-270 B.C.), was a Greek philosopher; he is generally regarded as the founder of scepticism. Pyrrho himself wrote nothing; his doctrine was exposed and published by his disciple Timon of Phlius. Pyrrho teaches that we must suspend judgment concerning knowing because we not capable of knowing. He holds that "it is supremely necessary to investigate our capacity for knowledge. For if we are so constituted that we know nothing, there is no need to continue enquiry into other things"² For Pyrrho, man's constitution renders him incapable of acquiring knowledge, thus, it is pointless to enquire about external objects as it is impossible to know about them.

According to Pyrrho, "things are equally indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrable. For this reason neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. Therefore we should not put our trust in them one bit, but we should be unopinionated, uncommitted and unwavering, saying concerning each individual thing that it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not".³ Following Pyrrho's mode of thought, the reason why our faculties can neither lead us to the truth nor falsehood is because the nature of things supposedly to be known is that they are "indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrable." Therefore, there is no way that we can know the truth or falsehood about the nature of things, given that they are vague and ambiguous. The best we ought to do is to suspend our judgment.

²A. A. Long & D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 14.

³*Ibid.*, 15

In line with what Plato says in his *Theaetetus*, Pyrrho maintains emphatically that all that is normally regarded as objective reality is nothing but mere appearances. It is not surprising, therefore, that “in his writings on sensations he says: ‘That honey is sweet I do not affirm, but I agree that it appears so’”.⁴ For a Pyrrhonist who is convinced that appearance prevails everywhere, it makes sense not to affirm that honey is sweet, but that it appears sweet. If one professes complete indifference to the nature of things, suspension of judgment to sense-experience follows logically. Given that the existing things are ‘stage-paintings’, that is, illusions; and given that the world in which we live is indeterminable, we must suspend our judgments since we can neither know the truth nor falsehood about a reality that is nothing but mere appearances.

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher, considered by some to be a leading neo-sceptic of the modern era. Hume attempted to incorporate elements of scepticism in his philosophical system. Hume’s scepticism was primarily caused by his theory of belief. In his *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume had this to say about scepticism: “There is another species of scepticism, consequent to science and inquiry, when men are supposed to have discovered either the absolute fallaciousness of their mental faculties or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation about which they are commonly employed. Even our very senses are brought into dispute by a certain species of philosophers, and the maxims of common life are subjected to the same doubt as the most profound principles or conclusions of metaphysics and theology”.⁵

Hume’s empiricism pushed him in the direction of scepticism. His scepticism was directed towards our reasoning faculty and was based on their inadequacy. The fact that two people that are confronted by the same object can make different judgements concerning it gave him the reason to doubt the truths of reason.

For Hume, “the common belief in an external world is not based on any sort of reasoning to begin with and cannot be supported by sound reasoning after the fact”.⁶

What pushes Hume’s philosophy towards an extreme form of scepticism is his theory of belief. According to Hume, all issues pertaining to metaphysics and theology are incapable of rational justification. He insisted that metaphysics books in our libraries must be burnt because of their uselessness. Given that conclusions reached in metaphysics and theology cannot be justified on rational grounds, Hume concluded that we must suspend our judgments concerning the apparent truths entailed therein.

Hume was sceptical about the faculties that generate knowledge. He held the view that all knowledge degenerates into probability. On his scepticism with regard to reason, he wrote:

⁴Ibid.

⁵David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 159.

⁶David F. Norton, *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 91-92.

Having thus found in every probability, beside the original uncertainty inherent in the subject, a new uncertainty deriv'd from the weakness of that faculty, which judges, and having adjusted these two together, we are oblig'd by our reason to add a new doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties".⁷

Inevitably, Hume doubted the credibility of the faculties normally regarded as vital instruments in the acquisition of knowledge. He was of the view that given their weakness when making judgments, the likelihood is that they result in uncertainty in as far as knowledge is concerned. For Hume, it was the infidelity of our faculties that led him to conclude that their nature is such that true knowledge cannot be obtained.

Hume maintained that the unreliability of our judgments obliges us to a chain of regress. He wrote:

In every judgment, which we can form concerning probability, as well as concerning knowledge, we ought always to correct the first judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the object, by another judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the understanding... As demonstration is subject to the control of probability, so is probability liable to a new correction by a reflex act of the mind, wherein the nature of our understanding, and our reasoning from the first probability become our objects".⁸

This "regression argument", as Robert Fogelin refers to it, is such that we must always step back and consider whether the procedure we follow in the acquisition of knowledge is reliable⁹ and is often referred to as the probability chain. According to Hume, we must constantly test the reliability of our faculties, and this must be done because they are not trustworthy. Every time we acquire knowledge, such knowledge must be tested by regressing to a probability claim. It follows that "this leads to an infinite regress of probability judgments concerning probability judgments...".¹⁰ This infinite regress of probability judgments is primarily due to the original uncertainty inherent in the subject, that is, the unreliability of our reasoning is such that it requires frequent check-up. Consequently, knowledge obtained therein justifies one to suspend judgment, meaning, that either truth or falsity is doubtful.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was a French philosopher regarded by many as the father of modern philosophy. He brought intellectual revolution in the seventeenth century, and challenged traditional Aristotelian philosophy. I intend to confine myself to discussing his *methodic doubt* as laid out in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Strictly speaking, Descartes was not a sceptic. His scepticism is merely a way of attaining certain knowledge. In his search for absolute certainty Descartes sets out to doubt all that can be doubted. He maintained that since:

⁷David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 182.

⁸Ibid., 181-182.

⁹D. F. Norton, *Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 102.

¹⁰Ibid., 103.

Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt.¹¹

Cartesian scepticism is universal: he resolved to doubt only such things that can be doubted. His doubt is also methodic, in the sense that he does not doubt for the sake of doubting but as a preliminary to the search for absolute certainty.

Descartes begins by demonstrating that sensory experience is unstable. He writes:

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.¹²

Any knowledge acquired through the senses is potentially suspect and therefore must be doubted. For example, I once smelled pork when I entered the kitchen but when I opened the pot it was beef. For Descartes, I should never trust the sense of smell. If one perceives a person from afar but coming nearer discovers that it is a pole, Descartes admonishes that person never to trust the sense of sight.

With his dream argument Descartes doubts even straightforward judgments. Thus he writes: "How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-room, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!"¹³ For Descartes, the seemingly straightforward judgment, that I am here sitting before the fire, must be doubted because one is never sure if one's present experience is just a mere dream. That I am sitting in my office reading Descartes' *Meditations* may be false because there is no guarantee that I am not just dreaming.

Descartes admits that the dream argument cannot be applied to mathematical truths. He maintains that "Whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false".¹⁴ For Descartes, disciplines such as mathematics and geometry deal with simple and universal things, and for that matter their truths are certain and indubitable.

To complete his universal scepticism, Descartes at this juncture introduces his demon argument. About the cunning demon Descartes says:

I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours,

¹¹R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 12.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 13.

¹⁴Ibid., 14.

shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgment.¹⁵

This powerful and cunning demon systematically deceives Descartes in every possible way. With his demon argument, Descartes maintains that even truths of mathematics he once regarded as being certain and indubitable are now doubtful because of the cunning deception of the evil demon. Everything he believes in may be illusions devised by the evil demon. Thus, with this argument, Descartes finds himself in a morass of universal doubt.

Descartes carries his method of doubt as far as it goes, and eventually arrives at the first indubitable truth in his quest for knowledge; and that is the existence of the thinking subject. Descartes says:

[L]et him [the demon] deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something...I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.¹⁶

Descartes expressed his cogito argument in the now famous phrase “cogito ergo sum”, meaning, “I think, therefore I exist”.

Descartes' intention of doubting all that can be doubted is not doubting for the sake of doubting, but rather, he was ultimately aiming at complete overthrow of Pyrrhonian scepticism. He conceived his methodic doubt as the cause of obtaining certain and indubitable truth. The indubitability of the cogito is such that it cannot be doubted because of its clarity and distinctness. For Descartes, the cogito served as the foundation for rational discourse from which other truths are discovered. In other words, the cogito provides the criterion of truth whereby other truths are recognizable. The illumination of the cogito is such that all that Descartes doubted in the *First Meditation* became clear and distinct. Illumined by the cogito, Descartes believed that he had overthrown the apparently undefeatable Pyrrhonian scepticism.

Rationalism and Empiricism

Rationalism

From the onset it is worth noting that Plato is more of a metaphysician than an epistemologist. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is hard to separate his epistemology from his metaphysics; the two are intertwined even where his focus is on knowledge. In his *Republic*, in particular, epistemological and metaphysical themes are discussed jointly. Given that this chapter is meant for those who are not acquainted with Platonic philosophy, an attempt will be made to separate Plato's epistemology from his metaphys-

¹⁵Ibid., 15.

¹⁶R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 17.

ics. It will be shown where the separation is unsuccessful.

In his *Theaetetus*, Plato is mainly concerned about the problems of knowledge, that is, about how knowledge is obtained. He argues against what he regards as false theories of knowledge. He accordingly concludes that knowledge cannot be and is not sense-perception. It is in his *Republic* that he explicitly states what true knowledge is. Again, it is in the *Republic* that Platonic metaphysics and epistemology are so intertwined that they are nearly impossible to separate. According to Plato, objects of true knowledge lie beyond the physical, sensible world. He claims that it is only in the intelligible world that, strictly speaking, true knowledge can be obtained. It is important to note that Plato's *Republic* is chronologically prior to his *Theaetetus*. But, given that the latter's conclusion is negative while the former positive, I prefer to begin with his *Theaetetus*.

Knowledge is Not Sense-Perception:

Plato never criticised Socrates, who was his teacher and mentor. It is not surprising that Plato never finds fault with come on Socrates' contentious views, including his highly disputed intellectual ethics. As part of his epistemology, Plato defends Socrates' refutation of the Sophists' doctrine that truth is relative. The Sophists' view that truth is relative is usually held to be the beginning of relativism, a theory that one and the same thing may be conceived differently. For the Sophists, there is nothing wrong if you claim that an object is purple and I claim to perceive the same object as red. There is no criterion for determining the truth, what is true for me need not be true for you and what is false for you need not be false for me. The relativity of truth is espoused by such prominent Sophists as Protagoras and Gorgias.

Contrary to the relativism of the Sophists, Plato maintains the view that there must be stable norms leading to abiding object of knowledge. In as far as ethical conduct is concerned, for instance, it must be based on knowledge of eternal values. Against the relativism of the sophists, Plato held that values must be the same for all people at all times. An important question for Plato regarding knowledge has to do with 'what knowledge is' and 'what it is that can be known'. The question concerning 'what can be known' is important because Plato did not associate knowledge with sense experience, but rather with that which can only be grasped by the intellect. For him, true knowledge must be infallible and of that which cannot be in the state of flux; since two people can perceive the same thing in two different ways, he argued that no knowledge can be associated with such flux. For Plato, strictly speaking, anything that is changeable cannot be known.

Emphatically, Plato maintains that knowledge is not sense-perception, against the view of Theaetetus (the character after whom the book is named) that "seeing is believing", viz., knowledge is perception. Theaetetus is still convinced and influenced by Protagoras' teaching that: "to myself I am judge of what is and what is not to me..."

man is the measure of all things... each to himself the sole judge, and everything that he judges is true and right".¹⁷

Protagoras' contention that "man is the measure of all things" means that each person determines what is true, and truth is whatever one regards it to be. In this way, for instance, I am justified to maintain that it is very cold today and you are justified to hold that for you it is very hot. What is true for me is true, just as what is false for you is false. We are both right in our sharply opposed respective, because there is no norm or criterion for determining the truth. For Plato, if Protagoras' teaching is accepted, then no man is wiser than another; and no one can ever think falsely since "man is the measure of all things", and this is absurd.

Plato refutes Protagoras' statement that knowledge is perception. According to Plato, this theory mistakenly makes the senses the "measure of all things". If knowledge is identical with perception, the very fact of hearing a foreign language should imply understanding it. But one can hear a foreign language being spoken without knowing what foreigners are saying.¹⁸ Identifying knowledge with perception also could mean that as soon as one stops perceiving something, one would stop knowing it. But one can shut one's eyes and still know a thing even when not perceiving it. Therefore, knowledge cannot be the same as perception.

According to Plato, the view that knowledge is the same as perception is absurd, since it implies that no one person can be wiser than any other person. If one is the best judge of one's own sense-perception, one is always right. But we cannot all be right with different judgments regarding one and the same subject matter at stake. Therefore, if sense-perception is such that it justifies perceiving one and the same object differently, it follows that sense-perception cannot guarantee true knowledge.

Further demonstrating his discontent in as far as sense knowledge is concerned, Plato holds that much of what we know is not subject to sense-perception. For example, mathematical principles cannot be apprehended by the senses. Moreover, even within its own sphere, sense-perception is not knowledge. Sense-perception is restricted to particular visible objects, but can never grasp their *beingness*. Therefore, strictly speaking, one cannot acquire knowledge through sense-perception.

True Knowledge:

Plato states explicitly in Book VI of his *Republic* that true knowledge is the object of the intellect and not of sense-perception. It is here that it becomes extremely difficult to separate Platonic epistemology from his metaphysics. True knowledge consists in knowing *being* in its *beingness*. The 'whatness' of being can only be grasped by the intellect. By 'whatness' it is meant that which constitutes the essence of a 'thing' or 'being'. That which is genuinely known by the intellect alone must be abiding, and not subject to change.

¹⁷Plato, *The Works of Plato*, ed. Irwin Edman and Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1928), 506-507.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 509.

To understand fully and clearly what Plato means by true knowledge, one must first understand the distinction he makes between “becoming” and “being”. “Becoming” simply means change. The world around us is the world of becoming, that is, the world of changing particular things. According to Plato, trees, people, animals and all the many particular things in this world are not real, only shadows. No true knowledge can be obtained from the changing particular things because they are like this today and tomorrow they may be something else. For instance, this particular man is like this today, next year he may be a corpse. Therefore, anything that is in the state of flux cannot, strictly speaking, be known; the best we can achieve is to have an opinion about it.

On the other hand, “being” is that which is abiding, infallible, eternal and unchangeable. The world of “being” is the world that is unchangeable, certain, real and of ever unchanging principles. Thus, Plato maintains that “only philosophers are able to grasp the eternal and unchangeable ... those who wander in the region of the many and variable are not philosophers”.¹⁹ According to Plato, it is only the philosopher who can grasp by the mind and know that which is unchangeable and eternal. The philosopher alone deploys the intellect and is not aided by the deceptive senses. It is he alone, therefore, who can obtain true knowledge. The knowledge he obtains is not only real but also infallible.

True knowledge is knowledge of the universal, as opposed to opinions we have of the apparent particular things. For instance, goodness, beauty, justice, and the like are universal concepts. For Plato, “the idea of good is the highest knowledge... all other things become useful and advantageous only by their use of this”.²⁰ Knowledge of the many things we judge as good is valueless if we do not have an idea of goodness. Plato stresses his conviction that

there is an absolute beauty and an absolute good, and of other things to which the term ‘many’ is applied there is an absolute; for they may be brought under a single idea, which is called the essence of each.²¹

Strictly speaking, only ideas are known, though they cannot be perceived. It is because of the universality of ‘beauty’ that it can be used as a measuring rod regarding particular things we claim to be beautiful. For Plato, knowledge of the highest universal is the highest type of knowledge. Platonic “Forms” or “Ideas” are not abstracted from particular things; rather, they are essences existing in their own world, which Plato calls the intelligible world. It is in this world, a world reached by the intellect alone, where true knowledge can be obtained. In his “divided line”,²² Plato discusses the sensible world, that is, the world of becoming perceived by the senses, and the intelligible world,

¹⁹Plato, *The Works of Plato*, ed. Irwin Edman and Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1928), 442.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 469.

²¹*Ibid.*, 472.

²²*Ibid.*, 475–476.

which he refers to as the world of being. Since the particular objects in the world of becoming are always in the state of flux, the knowledge we can have about them is only that of fluctuating opinions. And since the existing things in the sensible world are mere images or shadows, the outcome of sense-perception is nothing but deception and delusion.

The intelligible world is the world of mathematical representations that always remain unchangeable, and therefore guarantee acquisition of true knowledge. These principles, theories and mathematical representations can only be grasped and understood by reason. For Plato, the knowledge acquired here is the highest type of knowledge; it is concerned with reality that exists in the strictest sense of the word. The faculty deployed therein, reason, is trustworthy, as opposed to the senses, which are deceptive.

Empiricism

John Locke (1632-1704) was an English philosopher and a proponent of empiricism. He defends his empiricist theory that all our ideas come from experience and sensation. The clarity and distinctness of sense perceptions is so convincing to Locke that he maintains that they give us all knowledge. Locke argues that innate ideas do not exist because they do not depend on experience. Aware that the word “idea” is conceived and understood differently, Locke first explains what he means by an idea.

It being that term [i.e. idea] which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species, or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking....²³

For Locke, “idea” refers to the objective reality perceived by sensory perceptions and the mental objects understood or grasped by the mind.

Locke discards the view of earlier philosophers that innate ideas are imprinted in the mind of man. If it was the case that innate ideas existed, knowledge could not be obtained, because the mind just discovers ideas already existing within it. Again, given that these innate principles, both speculative and practical, are inborn in our minds, there must be universal consent about them. Illustrating his denial of the existence of innate ideas universally agreed upon by all men, Locke holds that

... to prove innate principles, seems to me a demonstration that there are none such: because there are none to which all mankind give an universal assent....²⁴

For Locke, people disagree on the nature of objective reality. This disagreement on both speculative and practical ideas clearly attests to the fact that there are no inborn ideas.

²³John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), 32.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 39.

Furthermore, Locke maintains that:

If... children and idiots have souls, have minds, with those impressions upon them, they must unavoidably perceive them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths; which since they do not, it is evident that there are no such impressions.²⁵

Locke's argument is that if such impressions are innate, they must be known by all; and if they are not known by all, it means that they are not innate or inborn. Therefore, they must be obtained. Put in other words, for Locke, the theory of innate ideas commits the fallacy of inconsistency. It says children and idiots have such ideas in their minds and at the same time they cannot perceive them. So, he holds that "it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be".²⁶ That is to say, it is hard if not impossible for children and idiots to have innate ideas and to be ignorant of them. Those who adhere to the theory of innate ideas are self-defeating. According to Locke, if there is need, as indeed there is, for senses and reason to search and make discovery, it is because of the absence of innate ideas in our minds.

Having rejected the theory of innate ideas, Locke holds the view that at birth the mind is a *tabula rasa* or blank slate, upon which ideas produced by the senses are written. As to how an empty mind is furnished with ideas, Locke maintains that all knowledge is founded on experience. He writes:

First, our Senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them.²⁷

In this way, knowledge begins with sense experience. The senses perceive particular sensible objects, and the mind grasps that which is common in sensible objects and Locke calls that sensible qualities. He, then, refers to the whole process as sensation. So, Locke's empiricism consists in his claim that the mind is furnished with ideas from experience.

Regarding the senses, Locke holds that

Though the qualities that affect our senses are, in the things themselves, so united and blended that there is no separation, no distance between them, yet it is plain that the ideas they produce in the mind enter the senses simple and unmixed.²⁸

Unlike in Platonic and Cartesian rationalistic views where knowledge is obtained from reason, Locke holds the view that it is the senses that produce ideas in the mind. By the

²⁵Ibid., 40.

²⁶John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), 42.

²⁷Ibid., 122-123.

²⁸Ibid., 144.

senses he refers to both external and internal senses. Therefore, according to Locke, sense-perception is the primary source of all knowledge.

A.J. Ayer (1910-1989), a British philosopher, was one of the proponents of logical positivism. Logical positivism is a philosophical movement that is inspired by empiricism and the verification theory. As an adherent of logical positivism, Ayer restricts himself to verifiability as the only criterion for the meaningfulness of cognitive statements. He rejects Kant's synthetic *a priori* propositions and holds that necessary propositions are only analytic. Ayer begins his *Language, Truth and Logic* by eliminating metaphysics, and denies the existence of a transcendental reality. He holds that his charge against the metaphysician is due to the fact that "he produces sentences which fail to conform to the conditions under which alone a sentence can be literally significant..."²⁹ According to Ayer, any proposition that fails the test of verification is nonsensical, and such is the nature of all metaphysical utterances. He holds that metaphysical utterances are simply due to the commission of logical errors. Any claim to knowledge of a reality that transcends the phenomenal world must be regarded as meaningless since whatever transcends the phenomenal world cannot be observed and verified. For example, the proposition "the soul is immortal" transcends the limits of sense-experience, and given that as such it cannot be verifiable, it is nonsensical.

For Ayer, the criterion of verifiability is the only one that can assure the genuineness of statements. He holds that "We inquire in every case what observations would lead us to answer the question, one way or the other; and if none can be discovered, we must conclude that the sentence under consideration does not... express a genuine question".³⁰ In this way, genuine assertions about our phenomenal world must be verifiable only through observation or experience. Statements are meaningful only if they are verifiable empirically. If they fail this test, they are meaningless. For example, the proposition "the soul is immortal" is meaningless because it is not empirically verifiable. For Ayer, knowledge of the supersensible, that is, of God, the soul and the like, is unthinkable since their truth cannot be conclusively established in experience.

In like manner, another exponent of verifiability, Moritz Schlick holds that:

there is no other source of knowledge but sensations, and this statement obviously means that the truth or falsity of a physical assertion is quite solely dependent on the occurrence of certain sensations.³¹

Only statements about physical objects are verifiable through observation; and genuine knowledge is confined to that which can pass the test of verifiability.

Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804), is a pre-eminent German philosopher primarily concerned with vindicating the authority of reason. Kant refutes Hume's rejection of metaphysics, and defends the existence of *a priori* judgments. In possession of his own distinctive philosophy in the 1770s, Kant insists on treating epistemology as first phi-

²⁹A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1936), 15.

³⁰A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1936), 16.

³¹Richard Boyd, *The Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 43.

losophy. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant attempts to reconcile empiricism with rationalism. As we have seen earlier, Locke upholds his empirical claim that the fundamental source of all knowledge is observation, that is, it is by *a posteriori* means that knowledge is obtained. On the other hand, rationalists such as Descartes and Plato hold the view that some knowledge is *a priori*, that is, independent of experience. Kant seeks to reconcile these two views by introducing a third type of judgment he refers to as synthetic *a priori*.

Kant is in agreement with Locke that sense-perception is the primary source of all knowledge. Kant writes:

That all our knowledge begins with experience there can be no doubt. For how is it possible that the faculty of cognition should be awakened into exercise otherwise than by means of objects which affect our senses.³²

In respect of 'time' for instance, Kant maintains that knowledge begins with experience. *A posteriori* knowledge is contingent: its truth or falsity is wholly dependent on certain conditions at a given time. Even though Kant maintains that all our knowledge begins with experience, he could be said to be more of a rationalist since he regards knowledge as being merely contingent. *A posteriori* judgment is designated as synthetic, that is, the type of knowledge in which the predicate adds something to the subject or it is not identical to it. A judgment in which 'the connection of the predicate with the subject is not cogitated through identity' is called synthetic judgment.

Kant agrees with rationalist philosophers, that some knowledge is *a priori*, that is, independent of experience. He maintains that "By the term 'knowledge *a priori*',... we shall in the sequel understand, not such as is independent of this or that kind of experience".³³ *A priori* knowledge, therefore, is a knowledge obtained altogether independent of experience. The senses do not play any role here; only reason is deployed in *a priori* knowledge. As opposed to *a posteriori* knowledge, which is contingent, *a priori* knowledge is characterized by necessity. According to Kant, "if we have a proposition which contains the idea of necessity in its very conception, it is a judgement".³⁴ The idea of necessity implies the idea of infallibility. This means that *a priori* knowledge is infallible. Also, the idea of necessity entails that of unchangeability. While *a posteriori* knowledge is changeable, *a priori* knowledge is unchangeable.

A priori judgments are analytic, and Kant defines analytical judgments as "those in which the connection of the predicate with the subject is cogitated through identity".³⁵ In this case the predicate adds nothing to the subject. For example, when I say, "man is a rational animal", this is an analytical judgment. The idea of rational animal is contained to that of man. In other words, man is identical with a rational animal. Also, universality characterizes knowledge as purely *a priori*. When I say that "man is a

³²Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), 1.

³³Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), 2.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 7.

rational animal” I actually mean that every being called man is a rational animal. The proposition “man is a rational animal” admits no possible exception, it is valid absolutely *a priori*.

Having refuted Hume’s rejection of metaphysics, Kant connects this science with the problem of synthetic *a priori* judgments. Kant holds that:

As to Metaphysics, even if we look upon it merely as an attempted science, yet, from the nature of human reason, an indispensable one, we find that it must contain *a priori* synthetic knowledge.³⁶

He holds that metaphysical claims ought to have an *a priori* status since they are necessary. However, he also maintains that objective metaphysical judgments are also synthetic. Kant himself claims that this synthetic *a priori* character is somehow mysterious. Solving the mystery consists in explaining how a proposition can be known as necessary and at the same time be objective. Kant tries to resolve the problem of propositions that are known as necessary while being objective by introducing the idea of intuition. He writes:

Mathematical science affords us a brilliant example, how far, independently of all experience, we may carry our *a priori* knowledge. It is true that the mathematician occupies himself with objects and cognitions only in so far as they can be represented by means of intuition.³⁷

For Kant, mathematical judgments are always synthetic, and he also holds that proper mathematical propositions are always judgments.³⁸ Kant relies on intuitive procedures in his attempt to reconcile the problem at stake. He maintains that synthetic judgments rest on intuition. A proposition that can be known through its concepts is analytic, but that which is not knowable through its concepts is knowable by intuition.

Conclusion

Pyrrhonism

Pyrrhonian scepticism is such that all is in doubt. As compared to dogmatics and academics, Pyrrhonists deserve to be referred to as complete doubters. While dogmatics and the academics debate on whether something can be known or nothing can be known, Pyrrhonists push scepticism further by suspending judgment on all questions. They suspend judgment even on the question whether or not anything can be known. Pyrrhonists portray a wholesale scepticism in that they suspend judgment on all propositions. For example, they doubt that all is in doubt.

³⁶Ibid., 11.

³⁷Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), 5.

³⁸Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), 9.

I have chosen to discuss the Pyrrhonist extreme sceptical view to show the danger that can be caused by scepticism in our endeavour to pursue and obtain knowledge. Pyrrhonist scepticism laid the foundation for criticizing all theories of knowledge. This type of scepticism rejects the legitimacy of philosophical speculation with regard to our investigation of the nature of things. In short, Pyrrhonist scepticism is not only an obstacle to philosophical speculation on its pursuit of truth, but also to scientific discovery.

Cartesian Scepticism

Cartesian scepticism simply a method of doubt that is ultimately intended to overthrow the seemingly irrefutable Pyrrhonian scepticism. That Hume is a sceptic is clear from the previous discussion on his scepticism. The question that remains to be answered is whether his scepticism is moderate or universal. Taking Hume's overall writings, it is not easy to answer this question. If we define scepticism as a critique of the capacities of our intellectual faculties, Hume qualifies to be classified as an unmitigated sceptic. I have already commented on Hume's claim that "we are oblig'd by our reason to add a new doubt deriv'd from the possibility of error in the estimation we make of the truth and fidelity of our faculties".³⁹ If it is the case, as Hume claims, that our intellectual faculties are unreliable, then doubt leading to universal scepticism is consistent with Hume's mode of thought. Given that Hume's sceptical doubt arises from a profound reflection, especially when the reflection is carried further, it follows that our rational faculties clearly become wholly destructive of belief. Understood this way, Hume appears to be recommending a wholesale suspension of belief.

But in his *Enquiry to Human Understanding*, Hume recommends a mitigated scepticism that is intended to combat Pyrrho's total suspension of belief. In his *Enquiry* he maintains that:

species of mitigated scepticism which may be of advantage to mankind, and which may be the natural result of the Pyrrhonian doubts and scruples, is the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding...⁴⁰

Hume's scepticism no longer recommends a total suspension of judgement, as he seemed to in the *Treatise*; rather, in the *Enquiry*, his scepticism seems to be just a version of fallibilism. Is it possible for one and the same person to recommend both moderate or universal forms of scepticism at the same time? This question is worth pursuing, but it is outside the scope of a chapter intended as an introduction to epistemology.

³⁹David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 182.

⁴⁰David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 162.

Descartes

Descartes proposes his method of systematic doubt to combat defenders of a wholesale suspension of belief. His method serves as a guide to those who want to discover with certitude the foundation for what is known, and enables them to obtain knowledge that is certain and indubitable. In reply to an objection to his views by one of his contemporaries, Bourdin, Descartes declares that with his method of systematic doubt he has successfully overthrown the doubts of the sceptics. He boldly proclaims that his disputed system is the only intellectual fortress that is capable of tearing into pieces the arguments of the sceptics.

Descartes' demon argument unveils the uncertainty of all that we normally think we already know. The importance of his arguments for universal doubt lies in disclosing the strength of scepticism. It is only when scepticism is carried to the extreme and accorded temporary victory that it can easily be refuted and overthrown. In other words, certain truth is discoverable only if it is preceded by pursuing the possibility of carrying doubt to the extreme. The Cartesian method of doubt, therefore, does not lead to a total suspension of judgment, but rather to a certain and indubitable truth.

Descartes maintains that sceptics doubt for the sake of doubting and declare not to know anything. For Descartes, doubt is deployed to strengthen the human mind in its search for a certain and indubitable truth. In this way, the Cartesian systematic method of doubt must be seen as a process that leads to certain and indubitable truth. Descartes' *First Meditation* overthrows scepticism because the arguments of the sceptics have all been explored. The cogito emerges victorious over the long-standing, apparently irrefutable scepticism.

However, Descartes' systematic method of doubt is not without problems. First, it is hard to understand how an entirely negative method can ultimately yield positive results. Cartesian method of doubt "rejects all the tools of previous philosophy... But when even sense information and the syllogism have been rendered dubious, what is left?"⁴¹ Descartes rejects Aristotelianism, which was used as a means of obtaining knowledge, and replaces it with doubt. A close scrutiny of Descartes' *First Meditation* casts doubt and raises unanswered questions. For example, should we really doubt the reliability of the senses simply because they deceived us once or on several occasions? Is it true that we are unable to differentiate when we are awake and when we are asleep, dreaming? Why should we bother ourselves with a hypothetical and purely imaginary demon?

Second, the Cartesian systematic method of doubt as applied in the *First Meditation* implies that we cannot reach certain and indubitable truth. If we adopt Descartes' method:

Every step Descartes took in a positive direction could be shown to be doubtful on his own standards, since he might be deceived, or he might be dreaming. Whatever appears

⁴¹Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 196.

clear and distinct to Descartes may not actually be so, if the method of doubt is taken seriously.⁴²

One can correctly ask why Descartes declines to carry his method further when he arrives at his cogito. When proclaiming that 'I exist therefore I am', he may be dreaming. Regarding his belief in the existence of God, why does he ignore this time the possibility of being deceived by the cunning demon? If Descartes carries his method to the extreme in the succeeding *Meditations* as he did in the *First Meditation*, he will still find himself in a morass of universal doubt.

Plato

Plato holds that knowledge consists in the apprehension of the intelligible world, which does not change. He believes that that world contains elements, which he calls Ideas or Forms. Platonic Ideas are grasped only by the intellect in the intelligible world, which is only where knowledge is possible. These Ideas, for Plato, are really real and they exist eternally. Plato's theory of knowledge is conceived as being rationalistic because he maintains that it is reason alone that must be deployed to discover true knowledge. For Plato, absolute certain knowledge cannot be discovered in sense-experience, rather, we must seek for it only in the realm of the mind. In my previous discussion on Plato I have already stated that the Platonic sensible world is a world of shadows; true knowledge cannot be obtained from such an ever-changing world.

The Platonic rationalistic theory of knowledge is subject to criticism as well. With his radical intellectualism, Plato over-emphasizes thought, whose characteristics are sharply opposed to sensation. But he carries the disjunction of the intelligible and the sensible to the extreme. By regarding the intellect as being capable of grasping the world of Ideas, he unfortunately denies that intellection is grounded on sense-experience. Besides, the reality of Platonic Ideas that are eternal, necessary and unchangeable is questionable.

For Plato, the world of Ideas is fixed in a state of immobility, and it is only in this world where the intellect can obtain true knowledge. He regards the sensible world, that is, the world of appearances, as being in a state of perpetual flux. As such, the latter world cannot be known; first because it is changeable, and second, because it is known through the senses, which are deceptive. But it is hard to believe Plato's view, since the primary function of the senses is to provide the intellect with sensible data in the acquisition of knowledge. Moreover, Plato's theory of knowledge is sharply opposed to the immensely convincing and successful discovery of modern science, which relies heavily on sense-experience.

Locke

Locke explains our acquisition of knowledge in terms of sense-experience. He denies Cartesian innate ideas and maintains that our knowledge is obtained through our senses.

⁴²Ibid., 197.

For Locke, no ideas are prior to our sense experience. He maintains that neither children nor idiots are aware of Descartes' apparent innate truths. He regards a claim that such truths exist in their minds to be nonsensical. In short, Locke holds that all our ideas originate from experience. A newborn baby's mind is a "tabula rasa" on which ideas will be imprinted. Locke distinguishes primary qualities from secondary qualities. While the former exist in the bodies themselves, the latter simply produce ideas in the mind and not in the bodies themselves.

However, Berkeley, a contemporary of Descartes and Locke, correctly objects to Locke's somewhat dubious distinction between the primary and secondary qualities. Berkeley points out that we know primary qualities by noting the differences in secondary qualities; and if this is the case, then the distinction made by Locke falls apart. Moreover, many of his critics observe that the nature of ideas, described by Locke as signs, is not clear.

There should be... arguments proving the existence of an external world. Locke should have seen... that he can hardly accept the talk of insensible particles and a causal theory of perception, if he is going to insist that all our knowledge arises from sensation and reflection. Furthermore,... Locke's ideas block direct access to the physical world, they are a screen or veil between the perceiver and the world.⁴³

Ayer

For Ayer, a sentence is factually significant on the condition that one can verify the proposition which it purports to express. This means that it is imperative to know what type of observation will be deployed to lead one to accept a proposition as being true, or to reject it as being false. If an observation determines the truth or falsity of a proposition, such a proposition is significant; if it does not, it is nonsensical. Imbued with the spirit of logical positivism, Ayer rejects Kant's belief in synthetic *a priori* propositions. All necessary propositions are analytic, and as nonempirical they are meaningless. Only statements which are empirically verifiable are meaningful.

But if we abide by Ayer's logical positivist's verifiable principle, our pursuit of knowledge becomes too narrow. Statements such as "the human soul is immortal" and "there is a God" are eliminated, because they cannot be empirically verifiable. With its empirical method, logical positivism cannot quench the thirst for a holistic acquisition of knowledge. Moreover, Ayer's theory fails to solve the problem as to whether we have non-verifiable statements that we can count as true.

Kant

Kant attempts to reconcile empiricism and rationalism, which he refers to as two extremes. For Kant, reconciliation of these extremes can reconstruct and restore unity to the edifice of knowledge. He maintains that some things can be known without any experience. Such things are known *a priori*: known before experience. For instance, space and time belong to the category of the things known *a priori*. *A posteriori*

⁴³John Yolton, *Locke: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 149.

knowledge is contingent, and here the truth of statements is dependent upon particular conditions. While *a priori* judgments are analytic, *a posteriori* judgments are synthetic. Kant introduces a third type of judgment, namely, synthetic *a priori* judgment. These are necessary judgments entailing empirical elements.

But Kantian theory of knowledge tends more toward rationalism, because he gives a predominant role to analytical reason. As to what can be obtained in the real world through our senses, Kant thinks that we can know nothing. This proves that he is more of a rationalist than an empiricist. If that is the case, he cannot successfully reconcile the two views. Instead of reconciling the two views, Kant tends toward suppressing some of the strong claims laid by empiricists. He reduces the function of the datum (i.e. the immediate object of the senses) to the extent that nearly the whole weight of reconstruction becomes the activity of the knowing subject. Besides, it is not clear why Kant regards “space and time”, for instance, as *a priori* forms of sensibility, and “reality” as an *a priori* category of understanding.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

African Philosophy

John Ayotunde Bewaji

Introduction

African Philosophy has had a curious history and, as a discipline, has undergone many changes over a period of three quarters of a century. It didn't start out as "Philosophy" proper, because to ascribe philosophy and philosophic capacity to the progeny of enslaved, colonized, oppressed and BLACK peoples would have invalidated the foundations of other negating acts of subjugation. Instead, it was encountered under such headings as "African Beliefs", "African Traditional Thought", "African Indigenous World-views" or "African Folk Thought Systems", essentially by Western anthropologists and theologians (and recanted theologians) and Western-trained classicists in various academies in Africa and outside. For many decades there was no distinction between "African Philosophy" and "African Religions".

In fact, to grant Africa the capacity to develop "Religion" was a generous anthropological gesture, which concession was not made lightly, because of the negative effects it would have on the whole project of saving the souls of the barbaric primitives whose lives were ruled by idolatry, paganism and savage rituals. But, as other academic disciplines in African universities became bold enough to assert independence of existence and provenance – African History, African Literatures, African Religions, African Art, for example – African Philosophy also transmuted from the theologian-anthropologist-folklorist domain into the professional discipline that it is today. This it did, despite pockets of resistance that still had to be won over to the acceptance of the fact of the philosophical competence of all humans. Maybe this success is also a weakness, in that following Western Philosophy in separating philosophy from the people among whom it developed, and then claiming the philosophy as a personal creation, may not be such a good thing after all, as it has encouraged the professionalization of a human intellectual forte that should not be professionalised! There still remain people in the world today who would turn up their noses at the mention of African Philosophy, wondering "what is so named"? But this group has, thanks to the efforts of Africana Philosophers of all hues – including the instigators, detractors and creators alike – become trademarked by the declining membership recruitment capacity and ultimate extinction of their genre.

In this brief essay on African Philosophy the discussion will proceed in the following order: in the first section I will deal with the nature of philosophy and the relationship between philosophy, life or existence, and culture; in the second section I will consider the nature of African philosophy, as an intellectual reflection on and of life or existence or reality and culture; in the third section I will examine African philosophy's travails in intellectual discourse in Africa and elsewhere, its various epochs, the historical and contemporary concerns and the debates in African philosophy; in the fourth section I will discuss the branches of African Philosophy; in the fifth section I will note the probable directions for African philosophical research in the future and bring together the conclusions that flow from this discussion.¹

Philosophy

What is Philosophy?

There can be no doubt that "philosophy", as an intellectual discipline, has been well-recognized in the academic world as the fountain and the foundation of all the other theoretical, practical and applied intellectual disciplines. When any discipline attains a specificity of subject matter and delineation of methodology of investigation, such a discipline makes a break from philosophy, yet at its reflective moments still has reason to hark back to a philosophical examination of the foundations of its most recon-dite theoretical and practical problems. Thus, we have the acknowledged major branches of philosophy in logic, metaphysics, epistemology and axiology, as well as the various *applied* areas of philosophical treatment of other disciplines, such as philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, applied ethics, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of psychology, philosophy of anthropology, etc.

Also, there is no confusion when an individual speaks of his or her philosophy of life or the philosophy that underpins the operations of an organization, a group, an association or a society. Here it is supposed that what is meant or intended by "philosophy" in these instances are the principles that govern one's action, beliefs, disposition on the one hand, and the norms of behaviour, action or activities of an organization, group, association or society, on the other hand.

Humans are conscious beings par excellence (including being self-conscious), acquiring information through the use of the various sense organs, processing the information thus garnered using reason, retaining information and data relating to their experiences and thoughts in their minds in the form of memory, and arriving at inferences based on these. At the same time, or at a later time, they are also able to stand back and reflect on the whole process – of experience, of experiencing, of processing information, of deducing conclusions, of speculating on what has been, what is and what may yet be – which second order meta-activity is supposed to typify human-

¹I must warn readers that the limitation of chapter length imposed on me (which I have taken some liberties with in order to ensure that quality is not compromised in the interest of editorial convenience of space) will make aspects of the discussion sketchy, but I enjoin the reader to use the references provided to augment the discussion.

ity in what is referred to as her rationality, by comparison with our observation of the lives of other sentient beings. Because humans are beings capable of thinking and reflection, they demonstrate what is called the human proclivity for philosophical thinking, and it is the activation of this proclivity that breeds the reflective existence and traditions of various philosophies across various climes in human history. All humans, in all epochs, have used the intellect in the way we have outlined to develop philosophical ideas, ideas which are both reflective of the geo-envirom-cultural experiences and thoughts of peoples, and also indicators, normatively, of the intellectual aspirations, expectations and dispositions of peoples.

What is specially striking about the ways in which philosophy (philosophies) has (have) evolved across cultures is the effort that is made on the one hand to avoid error, ignorance and failure, and, on the other hand, to attain knowledge, justify beliefs and opinions, achieve successful use of ideas, knowledge and beliefs in all aspects of existence and to transmit the successful ideas to subsequent generations in all human civilizations. While error, ignorance and failure may not always be avoided in human endeavours, (and efforts to avoid them may turn out to be more errors or ignorance and failure) the fact that humans are never comfortable with accepting error that they are aware of—unless in rare instances of intellectual self-deception for motives that supersede our innate human desire to be right—demonstrates the human desire to attain wisdom, knowledge, and control over reality, nature and the environment. Nowhere is this desire more pronounced than in the area of philosophy, which accounts for the conflicting views that humans express about the same experiences and issues even as they continue to belong to the same or similar or different cultural, social, political, economic, scientific, religious, and intellectual traditions in various parts of the world.

The foregoing paragraph demonstrates the reason why one can accept the shorthand description of philosophy as “systematic reflection on life”², while a more detailed definition will see philosophy as the systematic critical, speculative, reflective, introspective, retrospective, conscious and intuitive attempts to explain experiences, events and issues confronted in the process of living, and this will show that it is also the means by which human beings seek to find solutions (answers) to profound life puzzles, be these puzzles ones dealing with natural phenomena or social experiences, be they concerned with health or with economic predicaments, or be they related to explaining the eventualities of the inexplicable relations between a divine Supreme Being on the one hand and the forces of suffering, pain, death and negation on the other hand.³

The philosopher then would be someone:

...whose heart is informed about these things which would be otherwise ignored, the one who is clear-sighted when he is deep into a problem, the one who is moderate in his

²T. Obenga, *African philosophy During the Time of the Pharaohs 2780-330* (London: Karnak House Publishers, 2004), 31.

³See J. A. I. Bewaji, *Beauty and Culture* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2003), 30.

actions, who penetrates ancient writings, whose advice is [sought] to unravel complications, who is really wise, who instructed his own heart, who stays awake at night as he looks for right paths, who surpasses what he accomplished yesterday, who is wiser than a sage, who brought himself (herself) to wisdom, who asks for advice and sees to it that he is asked advice.⁴

Clearly, this definition of who a philosopher is (which also exhibits in detail the task and nature of philosophy), according to ancient Egyptians of more than 4000 years ago, is far richer, more textured, more nuanced, more intelligent and comprehensive than that provided by Pythagoras, who used the festal game analogy to illustrate the nature of philosophic mind and philosophic enterprise.⁵ It is clear that this understanding of the nature of philosophy and the mental discipline of a philosopher is far closer to the Socratic idea of the intellectual rational life than that of the Sophists who seek to make gain from rhetorical engagements. For this reason also, it would seem that the above definition of the philosopher is more natural and reflective of the philosopher in all traditional and indigenous societies of the ancient, modern and contemporary civilizations of the world,⁶ whose attributes Odera Oruka described as defining the philosophic sage, by contrast with the mere sage, in the classic *Sage Philosophy*.⁷

A more illuminating aspect of the understanding of philosophy and the philosopher is that it clearly shows up the weakness of the effort to professionalise philosophy and to separate out the “task” of philosophising as the vocation of doing philosophy, as is the practice in the academia of today. For whatever reason, it is clear that philosophy cannot be hijacked by any group, whether they are the so-called teachers of philosophy (if philosophy can really be taught), or they are those who hold the reins of economic, political and technological power in any human epoch. If we hark back to the content of the description of the nature of philosophy, one thing is very obvious, relating to the humility of the one who would be known as the philosopher – this could be compared to the notion of leadership of one of the great philosophers in human history, Jesus the Christ, who advised that those who aspire to leadership must be the best of servants (St. Luke 22: 25-27).

Now, there is a chicken and egg relationship between philosophy and culture, such that one could wonder which came first. This may be because most of the time we first philosophise, or see others engage in philosophy, then we stand back and wonder at what we (they) have done and how to characterise it. Then, given the fact that language helps to manage ideas, we articulate vaguely what we have undertaken

⁴T. Obenga, *African philosophy*... 35.

⁵See J. A. Bewaji, “African Philosophy—Some comments,” in *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2 (1983): 70-83.

⁶That is, outside of the confines of the ivory towers in which specialisations and specialisms are instruments for the creation of private empires of intellectual dominance and often of fraudulent patents and copy-rights.

⁷See H. Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy* (Nairobi: Acts Press, 1991).

in as best a descriptive and conceptual manner as possible. Philosophy is, therefore, short-hand for conceptualising a complex intellectual experience, practice and expression. However it should be noted that every philosophy and every philosopher is a product of a culture. By the time Europe became a part of the human intellectual history, the philosopher was an individual who was insulated from society, and who developed ideas in "isolation" in the reclusive recesses of libraries. This led in some rather peculiar manner to the tradition of the individualism of professional philosophy, which, at its extreme, manifested in the crude arrogance of logical positivism and in some sense the reclusive introversion of nihilism and existentialism. This does not in any way mean to imply that there were no philosophers or thinkers or scientists whose ideas were original, evolving from the ideas and materials available to them, which they used in creatively insightful new ways, transcending the limits of their epochs, while at the same time remaining totally immersed in the culture that allowed them to develop these ideas.

Philosophy and Culture and Philosophy as Part of Culture

From ancient Nile Valley civilizations to contemporary philosophies in Africa, there is a clear near-homogeneity in the way in which the philosophical enterprise is understood and in which the philosopher understands his/her intellectual obligations to self and society. This is probably not unrelated to what Diop has referred to as the *Cultural Unity of Black Africa* in the book of the same title.⁸ But what is "culture"? There are various ways in which culture can be understood. These depend on the interest, aim and professional orientation of the individual interested in understanding culture. I would argue that all living things with any degree of consciousness and goal orientation will automatically develop what we would classify as culture. This follows from the fact that culture helps differentiate species from species and it is culture that enriches existence within the domain of a particular species.

Culture is all the material and non-material, intellectual and practical, mythical and pragmatic expressions of human beings in any community. It is the totality of the communicated and communicable processes, ideas, and thoughts relating to all the social, intellectual, material, scientific, artistic, technological, ethical, economic, political, judicial, legal, penal, rewarding, recreational, procreational, religious, metaphysical, epistemic, logical, linguistic artefacts of experience and expression that humans develop or evolve through the act of living. Manifestations of cultures are in customs, traditions, norms, rituals, rites, ceremonies etc., relating to various aspects of life in society, including leadership structures, hierarchies of rights, kinship relations, gender relations, educational infrastructures, musical facilities etc.⁹

⁸See Cheikh A. Diop, *The cultural Unity of Black Africa* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990).

⁹See J. A. I. Bewaji, "African Philosophy—Some Comments," in *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2 (1983): 70-83.

Culture relates to life in the same way that life relates to existence, for there can be no life unless existential issues are attended to and there can be no culture without life. Culture is a universal human artefact, and it is found in every human society. Culture is also dynamic, as it changes as the experiences, knowledge, interactions of humans with others and with nature change in society, albeit very slowly in many instances, such as in situations of resistance to new sexual orientations, introduced from external societies into another society.

The nature and speed of change of culture can be illustrated by three examples here. For the first example we shall look at the wife inheritance traditions of some African societies where there is a need to bear children for the deceased member of a family. Clearly, it is desirable for each member of a family to perpetuate the family name through bearing children for posterity, but in the face of HIV/AIDS in society, the tradition, custom and value of keeping family members as family members and preserving the family tree through procreation must be tempered with realism, logic and pragmatism. If a member of one's family, for example one's brother, died of AIDS, and the wife is infected with the HIV/AIDS virus, it would be foolhardy, irresponsible, and even criminal to insist on obeying custom or tradition and having carnal relations with the widow without due medical clearance, protection and caution. If custom and tradition were to be slavishly obeyed without the necessary medical precautions mentioned here, then the inheriting male would be signing his death warrant, which may actually result in the wiping out of the entire family itself, as other males who inherited the widow after each death would face the same fate. This is why there are always persons who, on reflection, reject the paradigms set up by others to determine thought, belief, action and behaviour. These persons may formulate alternatives to the prevailing ideas of their societies in a critical way, and their ideas may then become alternative philosophical perspectives for solving problems wherever they are encountered.

A second example that underscores how culture changes, and how underpinning philosophies evolve, relates to the reaction of the Anglican Churches in Africa to the ordination of a gay Bishop in New Hampshire in the United States of America. This was regarded by most African Anglican Church members and their leadership as not only an affront to the tradition of Christianity inherited from Jesus Christ but also a total repudiation of the teachings of the Holy Bible, in which can be read the Old Testament account of how homosexual practices in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah led to their destruction. More critical is that homosexuality is viewed as repugnant to traditional African cultures, beliefs and traditions. Thus, to practise homosexuality at all is quite abhorrent and offensive, and it is even more abominable to ordain a homosexual clergyman. According to African culture, homosexuality is an abomination which the ancestors would never be able to forgive and which would bring eternal damnation and suffering to any society that encouraged or condoned it. This, it may even be reasoned, could be part of the reason why the United States of America is mired in all sorts of international problems with domestic implications for Americans today!

Thirdly, it may be argued that culture could change rapidly within the life-span of a single generation as in the total bastardisation of the consciousness of a society by poor leadership as happened in Nigeria. This country has, within less than the last half century, destroyed all norms of social, political and economic accountability, and has given way to the glorification of corruption, the reification of mismanagement of resources and the perpetration of gross injustice on the larger segments of society by the few who have become the new District Officers who now lord it over their hapless countrymen and women with impunity.¹⁰ This has seen a country, formed from the amalgamation of different ethnicities with rich individual traditions, become one in which there is no tradition that upholds any form of human dignity at all. It has led to a society in which public property is nobody's property, hence game for all kinds of theft, embezzlement, wilful and malicious destruction and complete criminalization of the leadership.

Thus, we see that philosophy is the means by which society and people attempt an understanding, analysis, defence and propagation of culture, and it is the means by which a people or society give expression to their deepest comprehension of their experience of the nature of reality, including the analytical, interpretive, descriptive, comparative, speculative and other elements of their thoughts. Apart from the sterile triteness of the narrow narratives of philosophy in the West, there is another element of philosophy as studied in the West that creates a serious problem. This has led to the professionalization of philosophy as a discipline and as an enterprise.¹¹ It has led to the supposition that only adults who are male, literate, middle-aged, middle-income, white, and college graduates can engage in philosophical reflection, and that such reflection must be codified in a self-reflective manner. This supposes that children could not philosophize, that women could not, that illiterate peasants could not, that Africans and other peoples of colour could not philosophize, either because of a genetic intellectual inferiority or because of an absence of a mental faculty of "rationality", pace Aristotle, for experiencing and reflecting on the experiences! This particular factor has been the weakness of philosophy, especially in Anglo-American philosophical tradition.¹² Probably it is out of the desire to redress this anachronism that the International Federation of Philosophical Societies (FISP) is dedicating the 2008 World Congress of Philosophy to what it calls "Rethinking Philosophy Today". Probably it is also a small atonement for the hundreds of years of philosophical racism perpetuated by the so-called leaders of thought such as Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Locke, Hume, Kant and others who have denied segments of humanity intrinsic rationality and reflective capacity.

¹⁰See J. A. I. Bewaji, "African Philosophy—Some Comments," in *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2 (1983): 70-83, and J. A. I. Bewaji, 2003. *Beauty and Culture...*, 30.

¹¹J. A. I. Bewaji, *Beauty and Culture...*, 33.

¹²T. Obenga, *African Philosophy...*, 35.

African Philosophy - Nature

We have shown that “philosophy” is as old as humanity’s ability to use the faculty of reason. The antiquity of philosophy, identical to that of human consciousness of reflectivity, is born out by the fact that philosophy dovetails with development and/or evolution of civilization, as each civilization needs philosophy to give it meaning and expression and philosophy needs civilization to give it the raw material to enable it to blossom. The evidence suggests that wherever there is a consciousness of being (existence), there develops a need for explanation of not only the being, the context of being, the resources that make being possible, but also, in a rather compulsive way, the consciousness of consciousness itself. This is what it means to engage in the process and methodology of understanding the “examined life”, the process of knowing the self, the other, reality and beyond reality. This, as we noted in the last section, is the peculiarly human endeavour that has been deemed intrinsically a philosophical engagement¹³, as documented under the various names, in various languages, that show the engagement of philosophy in various indigenous geographical places in Africa, before the colonial experience. This clearly shows that Africa had philosophy, and probably gave philosophy to the rest of humanity, as the first abode of humanity on earth.

From the foregoing, “African Philosophy” is either, simply, African “systematic reflection on life”¹⁴ or it is African systematic critical, speculative, reflective, introspective, retrospective, conscious and intuitive attempts to explain experiences, events and issues confronted in the process of living, and this will show that it is also the means by which human beings seek to find solutions (answers) to profound life puzzles, be these puzzles ones dealing with natural phenomena or social experiences. Similarly, African philosophers are persons engaged in this intellectual enterprise who are of African or other ethnic descent, who are concerned with finding solutions to profound life puzzles that concern Africana peoples and their lives, or who are devoted to understanding how Africana peoples have provided solutions to such puzzles historically or contemporaneously.

There are various ways of doing philosophy. I have examined some of these in *Beauty and Culture*,¹⁵ including writing, arts, architecture, education, religion, and mythology. Having in the previous section settled the indisputable existence of African Philosophy as a field of intellectual endeavour and as a practice, there is a need now to mention some controversies that have dogged African Philosophy in the last half century. The controversies were created by scholars who have clear Eurocentric agendas of justifying the unjustifiable: the dastardly rape of Africa by her off-spring, Europe, through the Atlantic Slavery; the Colonization of the last century and the Neo-colonization that have persisted in various ways. One of these controversies emanated from the position characterized by Momoh as deriving from the logical

¹³T. Obenga, *African Philosophy...*, 35

¹⁴T. Obenga, *African Philosophy...*, 35

¹⁵See J. A. I. Bewaji, *Beauty and Culture...*, 35

positivist scientism which flourished in the first quarter of the 20th century around Rudolph Carnap, Moritz Schilck, Frederick Waiseman, Otto Neurath, and Alfred Jules Ayer. If Philosophy is as we have suggested in this discussion, then reducing any philosophy to the project of either the language of science, or even making it necessary for philosophy to become experimental, would be to disown large portions of the rich text in philosophy related to diverse areas of human experience of reality, and human attempts to understand and communicate the variegated reality.

Thus, the existence of other philosophical traditions even in Europe (East, Central and West with all the heterodoxies within each)¹⁶ as well as in Asia and Africa and the Pacific and Oceania, have, on the one hand served to put to rest the negative attitude of the misguided positivist and neo-positivist critiques of philosophy and, especially, of African philosophy. On the other hand, the rediscovery of metaphysics in the clear vision with which we now see that science needs metaphysics to thrive and that science is a form of metaphysics in its most scientific and abstract form, the transcendence of Newtonian-Cartesian mechanistic rationalism, through the relativity 'formulated' by Einstein, and the paradigm shift engaged by quantum physics and the holographic space, have all brought about even more radical expression among the creative and honest thinkers in the West. This has resulted in the ushering in of a new era of awareness of pluralism and the need to be more tolerant of other and diverse means of attaining various forms of knowledge, on the one hand, and, on the other, the necessity of evaluating the provenance and validity of various forms of knowledge. Thus, the dethroning of the Western hegemony of intellectual priority has opened the way for the acceptance of other intellectual traditions and other philosophical traditions beyond the narrow Western perspective.

The purpose of insisting that there is need to identify the originator of a philosophical idea in the form of an author is not to be confused with the question of whether or not philosophy exists and has existed in all human traditions historically and contemporaneously. Rather, it is an issue that relates to and must be understood against the background of the dominating possessive individualistic Western-engendered pernicious traditions of property ownership that have permeated the consciousness of peoples (humans) around the world. This means that it must be insisted upfront that writing is not the problem, because writing is neither necessary for reflection nor for having ideas, though it is one of the important ways of documenting and preserving all kinds of ideas. Thus, when people respond to the issue of whether or not philosophy is a function of writing, such responses are addressing a wrong problem formulated disingenuously to implicate a false emphasis on literacy – as if literacy by itself is the instrument of reflection and as if there are not many persons with PhDs and other titles whose capacity for reflective engagement is questionable as evidenced in the ways they handle their own affairs or the affairs of the public entrusted to their

¹⁶Even so-called Great Britain is an agglomeration of ethnicities that are constantly at each other's throat, given the experience of the age-old Irish struggle for self-realization and independence from colonial Britain and the many currencies that are used in United Kingdom.

care! For the racists who deny the existence of African Philosophy on account of the literacy situation in Africa are making the ignorant assumption that in pre-colonial Africa writing was absent, and if writing was absent then the tradition of philosophizing must have been absent also, as philosophy is essentially a written (ad)venture, hence what obtained in Africa and in other so-called pre-literate societies could not have been any more than mere folk tales, folk beliefs, oral traditions, myths, legends, superstitions, mysticisms, mythologies, cosmologies, cosmogonies, etc., but not really philosophy.¹⁷ More critically, if writing spread from Africa and Arabia and Asia to Europe, then it would seem that Europe could only have started thinking (reflecting) when writing finally reached their shores!

Like the wrong-headed positivist claims mentioned above, many ways have been found to respond to this, to show how this is racism in a borrowed dress, such as:

First: Since writing is not essential to thinking it would mean that philosophizing is not a function of literacy.

Second: Some of the most respected thinkers in all societies, like Socrates and Jesus the Christ, have been people who did not write down their ideas.

Third: Before the modern influx of Arabic and Western education in Africa, many African societies had developed simple and complex systems of writing. That is to say, there is no doubt that many of these so-called pre-literate societies derived various literacy mechanisms either directly from the Nile Valley civilizations or indigenously by their own effort, given various needs to document ideas and, hence, had means of codifying ideas, sending messages and passing information from person to person and from generation to generation. Some of these African and other regional philosophical texts are being deciphered even today among so-called unlettered societies.¹⁸

Yet “educators” in Africa and of Africana descent continue to teach that Africans had no systems of writing before colonization, that Columbus discovered the Americas, that Mungo Park discovered River Niger, that Bantus had no Philosophy until Father Placide Tempels was generous enough to endow them with *Bantu Philosophy*, that Senghor’s Negritude had no value except as a temporary bus stop on the journey for the reclamation of the African pride in her intellectual antiquity, etc. This imperils the truth and endangers the development of a healthy African psyche in Africana youth, a psyche which needs to be aware of the greatness of its progeny, so as to encourage Africana peoples to aspire to ethnic greatness rather than the current pursuit of individual narrow self-enrichment as defined in the borrowed sense of humanity derived from Western individualism and destructive greed. The myopia of Africana thinkers and leaders in various fields of human endeavour has been the greatest instrument in allowing Robin Horton (1993), for example, to even gain audience for intellectually barren and culturally reprobate ideas as published in that celebration of racism in *Patterns of thought in Africa and the West*.

¹⁷See Bodunrin, 1985, Hountondji, 1983 and Horton, 1993.

¹⁸Van Sertima, *Blacks in Science* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1991), 197-214.

But if one were to ask such questions as, "What is Western or European philosophy?" "Who are Western or European philosophers?" and "Was all of Western or European philosophy done or written by Westerners or Europeans?" the audience, if operating from the Eurocentric assumption that all Western philosophy equals universal philosophy and vice versa, may feel that one has asked very awkward, irreverent and irrelevant questions.¹⁹ While serious intellectual engagements can take place about authorship, the ethnicity or regional or racial issue is always derived from a snide supposition that reason is the preserve of an ethnic or regional or racial group. This is what makes such questions harbingers of cynicism and crude paternalism. Perhaps this is part of the difficulty one faces on being asked these questions about African Philosophy, especially when we bear in mind the fact that we seldom ask these ludicrous questions about other regional philosophies and philosophers. In most cases, when questions are asked about Western philosophy, it is supposed to mean "what is philosophy?" as if all philosophy is Western, or that all philosophers are Euro-American English-speaking persons or, for that matter, as if all philosophers are Western Europeans or Anglo-Americans.

Chief of this concealment of ironical inquiry is a sense of patronage, a condescension, which strangely evokes a cynical smile that invites the African thinker to join a nonexistent debate made profound by some irony of historical and intellectual perversion. In sensing this, the thinker is given a withdrawn and negativized ground for discourse, where, if he/she becomes aggressive in projecting a reasonable submission that philosophical reflection is just as natural to rational beings in search of meaning and understanding of self, the universe and beyond, as eating or breathing, he/she is labelled a radical and asked to produce evidence that his/her progenitors were rational humans; and if he/she continues into a logical reflection as to why Europeans only started reasoning and philosophizing (since they had writing) at the middle century before the Common Era, there are blank stares from various directions. Even a progressively rising star of social and political philosophy, championing the dying cause of liberalism in political theory and practice (with its enshrinement of undisciplined cravings for irresponsible freedom without the associated recognition that freedom can only be purchased at the price of an earned recognition of otherness that the West admires in the so-called traditional societies)²⁰ recognizes the misplaced reflexivity of the Western general understanding of philosophical beginnings. He did not care to raise directly or indirectly the regional philosophical issues referred to here, but he is none-the-less aware of the political and social nature of the upheavals that a non-palliative indirect disposal of the matter would generate for his programmatic discourse of origins of Western philosophy.

¹⁹A. Akin Makinde, *African Philosophy, Culture and Traditional Medicine* (Ohio: Ohio University Monographs in International Studies, 1998), 88-125.

²⁰See William L. McBride, *Social and Political Philosophy* (New York: Paragon House, 1994).

Clearly there is a coy avoidance of the central dishonesty of Western historians of philosophy and human rationality or reflectivity (that is, universal history of human rationality and reflectivity) in the statement²¹, that:

Identifiably philosophical thinking in Western culture cannot be said to have begun on a set date and in a set place. Rather, what written records we retain suggest that the gradual evolution of efforts systematically and critically to explain the world grew out of less systematic religious stories and pre-scientific folk wisdom. A standard convention of historians of thought designates Thales, a widely reputed “Wise Man” of an early period in Greek civilization (early sixth century B.C.) as the first philosopher. Fragmentary recorded sayings of his attempt to offer unified explanations of a universal sort - namely, that all things were made of water and are full of gods.²²

McBride continues in this vein, alluding to the so-called outposts of the Greek civilization around the Mediterranean. These are thinkers, according to McBride, who “concentrated above all on giving accounts of the physical, natural world”.²³ Before getting to our initial question, it is interesting to note that the “the written records we retain” does not indicate that this retention is a deliberate socio-cultural and political choice of intellectual deception and falsehood and that curiously “standard convention of (Western) historians (of human intellectual history)” always suppose that the explanations of the “first” philosophers of Greece (read Europe) constituted attempts to explain the universe, while other similarly profound attempts, for example, the type found in the *Genesis* and in Yoruba accounts of the origins of the universe and humanity, are not of the same genre! This is curious, as it plays a game of double standards which supposes the “unified explanations” of the Greeks were superior, or of a different kind, to those of the writers of the *Genesis* or similar theories in other societies and cultures. How is the explanation that all is derived from water, or air, or fire, or some other such elemental metaphysic any better than one which claims that in the beginning was the word, from which all other things came about? Who determines this kind of superiority? In what way is the *Proslogion* of Anselm superior to the Yoruba explanation of the nature of the Supreme Being – Olodumare – with regard to His Immortality?²⁴ And if the Setswana people consider the nature of morality of the Supreme Being – Modimo – and conclude that Modimo is the source of morality in society, in what sense would that differ from the Platonic theistically derived *Sumum Bonu*?²⁵

²¹W. L. McBride, *Social and Political Philosophy...*, 8

²²W. L. McBride, *Social and Political Philosophy...*, 8.

²³W. L. McBride, *Social and Political Philosophy...*, 8.

²⁴See Bewaji, “Oludumare-God in Yoruba belief and the Problem of evil” *African Studies Quarterly* Vol.4 (1998) (Electronic Journal).

²⁵See J. N. Amanze, *African Traditional Religion in Malawi, - The case of the Bimbi Cult* (Blantyre: CLAIM, 2002).

In a similar vein, R. G. Collingwood, in *Speculum*,²⁶ describes how the history of Western science started with the Greeks. It so happened that from nowhere the Greeks started to depart from the wasteful and useless indulgence of stupidly confounding imagery and symbolism with reality, and once they took this incredible step, all other goodies in the kingdom were added unto them. He says,

The history of European science begins with the break-down of a religious view of the world in the mind of ancient Greece, and the concepts of Greek science appear as a kind of depersonalized gods. The early Greek scientists were trying to replace a world of religious imagery with a world of intelligible concepts.²⁷

In light of the foregoing, I feel that in order to answer the questions about African philosophy I am compelled to answer other compelling, usually unasked, questions that I raised earlier about Western philosophy. This is because the answers to these unasked questions about Western philosophy necessarily illuminate the tenor of the discussion of the ontological issue in African and other geographical, regional and ethnic philosophies. I see and will construe Western philosophy as multifaceted, hence, as the intuitive, critical, speculative, analytical, reflective, often deliberate but not always deliberate, attempts to find solutions to profound life puzzles by persons of Western and kindred nativity.

Immediately I do this, I inadvertently open myself to various possible (real and imaginary) criticisms. First, what about non-western thinkers like St. Augustine and W. Anton Amo, who have contributed tremendously to Western philosophy? Where do I (an African thinker and a university teacher of Western and African philosophy, having taught in Africa and in the West Indies) fit in when I discuss the sceptical philosophy of, say, Peter Unger, C. I. Lewis, David Hume, Pyrrho, Sextus Empiricus, Chisholm, Hobbes, Locke, or the concept of person in Western and Africana thought, the problem of the existence of the Supreme Being and existence of evil in the world, the nature, content and justification of morality in various cultures and in theoretical ethics in these and all other cultures, etc.? Would I be a Western philosopher or an African philosopher in a “strange” discipline? This is the point of my slippery caveat – my deliberate addition of the strange word “kindred” in my delimitation of Western philosophers.

Thus, when I describe African philosophy and the task of African philosophers (and, by extension, Africana philosophy and Africana philosophers) as the critical, speculative, analytical, reflective, introspective, retrospective, conscious and intuitive attempts to find solutions to profound life puzzles by persons of African and kindred nativity, you will understand my apprehension and immediate dilemma. What about such profound scholars as Barry Hallen, Pieter Hensbroek, Christian Negebauer,

²⁶See Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis or the Map of Knowledge* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1946).

²⁷R. G. Collingwood *Speculum*..., 161.

Franz Wimmer, Leonard Harris, Ivan Van Sertima, Lucius Outlaw, Gordon Ricardo Lewis, etc? That is, what about non-Africans and Africans of the Diaspora who are labourers in the vineyard of African and its Diaspora philosophy(ies), culture(s), ideas and knowledge? In my view, these thinkers are philosophers in so far as they engage in the kinds of reflections that address Africana and kindred human issues.

This is where my “kindred” caveat becomes curiously relevant and very useful again! But the next sets of troubling issues which will crop up immediately are: Should African philosophy and philosophers only be concerned with African realities, as some have suggested?²⁸ And, should African Philosophy, properly so-called, be authentic, unadulterated and peculiar?²⁹ Are these two to be seen as the necessary and sufficient conditions for differentiating African philosophy from other philosophical traditions? This last is the view that impels Horton’s writings³⁰ even when not fully recognized as such; and it underlined the works of Hountondji³¹ and Bodunrin³² and, in an indirect sense, the works of Oruka,³³ especially those devoted to thematizing and understanding “Sage Philosophy”.

The first notion, emanating from those who see philosophy in the form of relevance, is that they would wish that African philosophy and philosophers be devoted to solving the myriads of problems facing Africans continentally and Diasporally. They suggest that there can be no sense in philosophy that luxuriates in speculations about the finitude of the linguistic “the”, while the ravages of poverty, famine, political backwardness, HIV/AIDS, economic underdevelopment, educational inequality, etc. are pervasive in Africa. Thus, for them, Philosophy, properly so-called, must be concerned with changing the African and Africana worlds, rather than interpreting these worlds! While this has the virtue of showing that African philosophy and philosophers understand the imperative of being at the forefront of solving problems, such a limitation on African thinkers and their thoughts would negate the whole nature of philosophy. It would become a straightjacket that limits the creative imagination of Africana philosophy from a systematic and reflective consideration of issues – whether regionally, continentally or universally.

The second notion, which suggests that African philosophy should be authentic, peculiar and distinctly African, when properly understood can be seen to piggy-back on the first. The idea of authenticity and peculiarity supposes that there are some

²⁸See Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary African realities* (Germany: Peter Lang, 1991), 22.

²⁹See Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy-myth and reality* (London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa, 1983).

³⁰Robin Horton, *Patterns of thought in Africa and West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³¹Paulin J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy...*

³²Peter Bodunrin, “Philosophy in Africa: the challenge of relevance and commitment” Lecture delivered at the University of Pennsylvania, 1989.

³³See H. Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy*.

ways of reasoning which are intrinsically and genetically African, just as there are problems which are peculiarly and intrinsically African with which only Africans should be concerned, and that there are African issues for which only African solutions must be found – while at the same time consigning African efforts at dealing with universal issues as out of order and of no value. The appeal of this kind of reasoning comes out of the allure of the first idea – philosophy and philosophers being relevant to their experiences and the realities of their societies. But the limitation of this kind of reasoning is clearly exhibited in the myopia that it foists on Africana intellect – indicating that they have no means of transcending the limitations of their onto-genesis.

What seems obvious from the above is that there is no simple way of finding a definition that would not be too broad, or too narrow, especially when we are compelled by the devious, but unformulated operational desideratum of those looking for a logically, politically and intellectually innocuous means of *denying* the existence of African philosophy and, by extension, the philosophical traditions of peoples other than Anglo-Americans! At the same time it is difficult to believe that Western philosophy or African philosophy is so difficult to define! In any case, I find it very curious to understand why, in the first place, it is necessary and interesting to define philosophy in regional terms. Do we ever attempt to define physics or chemistry or mathematics or even economics in regional, parochial terms, or rather speak of physics or chemistry or economics or mathematics in Europe, America or Africa? The African thinker, or any thinker for that matter, concerned with a definition of regional (continental) philosophy, be it African, Asian, European, American, etc., is in a very peculiar situation and only the waving of a magic wand, a skill beyond the competence of the philosopher, will do the trick! But if we have to do an intellectual cartographic delimitation of philosophical traditions and discourse in regional terms, then my remonstrations above could preface such an effort.

In closing this section of the discussion, we may note briefly a very brilliant scholar's contribution to this matter: Lewis R. Gordon's *Her Majesty's Other Children*,³⁴ which is remarkable in many respects. Apart from its negativizing and patronizing, yet creatively disingenuous title, and as the Yoruba people are well aware, *olomo lo mo omo t'oun bi* (a mother knows her child or children) or *omo ale ni i fi owo osi juwe ile baba re* (only the bastard points to show his/her father's house with the left hand), the segment on Africana philosophy is almost coterminous with my understanding of Africana philosophy. From this it is obvious that Africana philosophy is not only descriptive of "the thought that has emerged from the culturally and linguistically rich African (D)iaspora"³⁵ but also of that of indigenous Africans and non-Africans who have made contributions to philosophical discourse in, of, and about Africa and African Diaspora and realities relating to, and developing from these per-

³⁴See Lewis R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997).

³⁵L. R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children*, 6.

spectives. Hence, with a minor but important qualification, I embrace the description given by Outlaw, quoted by Lewis, that Africana philosophy is,

... a “gathering” notion under which to situate the articulations (writings, speeches, etc.), and traditions of Africans and peoples of African descent collectively, as well as the sub discipline - or field-forming, tradition-defining or tradition-organizing reconstructing efforts, which are (to be) regarded as philosophy. Use of the qualifier “Africana” is consistent with the practice of grouping and identifying intellectual traditions and practices by national, geographic, cultural, racial, and/or ethnic name for the persons who initiated and were or are the primary practitioners - and/or are the subjects and objects - of the practices and traditions in question (e.g. “American”, “British”, “French”, “German”, or “Continental” philosophy). However, “Africana philosophy” is meant to include, as well, the work of those persons who are neither African nor of African descent but who recognize the legitimacy and importance of persons African or African-descended and who contribute to discussion of their efforts, persons whose work justifies their being called “Africanist”.³⁶

The qualification I feel compelled to make is with regard to the indication that the term “Africanist” scholars be reserved for those non-African and non-African-descended scholars who recognize the legitimacy and importance of issues in African philosophy and engage them. My main grouse is that that type of patronage is unnecessary and does not and cannot constitute a definitional criterion for African philosophy and Africana philosophy or for any regional philosophy for that matter. It carries with it the rank odium of suggesting that their recognition is what makes these realities “realities” worth engaging. Whether they recognize these realities or not, the realities will not go away—the lived realities of those at the receiving ends of racism and racialism in their ‘liberal democratic’ societies and intellectual circles—just as in the same way the efforts of persons who, for example, for whatever reason cannot see or understand racism and racialism would not vaporize,

Yoruba people were highly suspicious of an educational process confined to a specific place and within specified hours of the day. This is because they are unable to comprehend how existence can be coached in such a limited fashion and be expected to apply to the diverse ramifications of lived realities. Hence, like the Western classroom (formal) education which only trains and produces a partial human being, able to read, write, speak in a tongue (attain some expertise, that is), and the products of which has constituted the bane of African societies by and large, Western philosophy has succeeded in alienating the populace. It has bred all sorts of irrelevant theories which are mostly impractical, impracticable and often anti-social, hence having little impact on various aspects of life. This has led to a situation in which meaning has to be siphoned out of these aspects only after they have been created, as art critics and philosophers do, *post eventum*, after the real sages and artists have left the thinking and creative scene. Because of this, it is clear that one has good reason to suspect the

³⁶L. R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children*, 6.

efforts to transplant the ideal of Western Philosophy to Africana environments, without first looking at the limitations of Western philosophy and philosophers within their own geo-cultural situations and remedying the problems that make philosophy such an irrelevant discipline in the West.

It is quite clear that this (professionalization of philosophy) has not been the case with African philosophy, that is, before the intellectual philosophical scene was invaded and pervaded by Western formal classroom “education” in academic philosophy, as reasoning was everywhere present in dealing with issues, and reasoning was not confined to a class of people called philosophers, because, for Yoruba people, *omo de gbon, agba gbon, l’a fi se ise d’ale Ile-Ife* – literally, this translates as “the child is wise, the adult is wise, is the foundation on which the ancient city of Ile-Ife was built”. The contending traditional philosophies were all pulled together in traditional African societies and melted in the cauldron of socio-cultural interest. Dissent was tolerated to the extent that such dissent was conducive to corporate welfare, and nursed to give variety and impetus to youth development and for corporate dynamic growth.

We conclude this section by reiterating the humanity of philosophizing. This serves the dual purpose of firstly indicating that philosophizing is not the prerogative of one race, colour, ethnicity or geo-cultural zone of the world. The implication of this is that it then shows that any human being can philosophize – without necessarily meaning that every human being therefore philosophizes. The second purpose is to show that philosophical reflection could be simple, protracted or convoluted – the mark of the best philosophical engagement would be clarity and simplicity, which would depend on the talent of each human or the preparation and attention that the human being has received with regard to the issues on hand or that the human being can pay to the issue on hand.

For this reason, the claiming of philosophical reflection as belonging to one geo-cultural part of the inhabited space is best seen for the racism that it is built upon. Once this has been seen, it becomes clear that any edifice constructed on partial truth can only continue to survive and thrive for as long as the remaining part of the truth remains effectively concealed or is allowed to remain untold. This is what the scholars who have deluded, and continue to delude, themselves into believing that philosophy started in Greece have failed to realize or have, by choice, decided not to realize. According to Mogobe Ramose,³⁷

... the plea that the light of human history shines brighter as it moves Westward is a failure to come to terms with the politics of development. Since the conquest of the indigenous peoples of the world in the unjust wars of colonization, the victors in these wars have devised a complex mechanism to ensure that they retain the unjustly acquired economic gains. In the course of time, these unjustly acquired economic gains have changed status from mere privileges to so called vested rights. No doubt these are rights

³⁷See Mogobe Ramose, 2002.

only by the grace of the sword but certainly not in the name of justice. From this point of view, development is a strategy devised and managed by the beneficiaries of the unjust wars of colonial conquest. The intention of the strategy is to establish and sustain dependency and underdevelopment in the nominally independent former colonies. This means ensuring that the nominally independent former colonies shall remain politically powerless to exercise their right to self-determination in an authentic way.³⁸

Thus, the whole intention of the disfranchisement of the philosophical creativity of peoples of colour is intended to perpetuate an intellectual hegemony of the “master” and dependency of the “servant”, where the denied (the servant) sees no just reason to claim what is rightfully necessary for their self-preservation, necessary survival and sustainable development. This serves to terrorize African students into being afraid of philosophy as a discipline when they are introduced to the discipline in the university. It also serves to paint a picture of godlessness in the minds of novices when they are told you studied philosophy to doctoral level at a university. This type of arrangement only measures up to the warped notion of intellectual exchange of the dialectically advantaged intellectual dictator if the oppressed people fail to repudiate the injustice. The repugnance of such patent acquiescence, whether voluntary or coerced, must never be denied, for to my mind, nothing is further from the truth than the suggestion that no injustice can be done to one who voluntarily accepts the injustice (*volenti non fit injuria!*), as injustice remains injustice whether the person who suffers it recognizes and rejects (or accepts) it as such or not. But even if there is no contesting the one-sidedness of the exchange, there still remains the matter of conscience that must be put at rest by the colonizers and those who have become handmaidens of colonization of their compatriots. This has accounted, on the part of the metropolises, for the acquiescence to tokenistic gratification of dependent territories through various grants and aids and the occasional appointment to peripheral academic chairs where persons of lower ilk, but of the ‘right’ complexion receive favoured positions above the demands of merit. As handmaidens of colonialism, many African intellectuals accept their own inferiority, preferring to employ Euro-Americans in place of Africans, and respecting the rejects of Western academia over the first rate scholars that are locally grown, even when the latter show better familiarity with indigenous issues and are able to proffer culturally germane solutions to culturally adaptive problems. The folly of many African intellectual and political leaders knows no bounds, to the extent that many African academics would rather quote in parrot-like Western academics instead of engaging what creative African thinkers have said; otherwise they dilute the truth in order to get published in the networked publishing houses that are regarded as famous in the West, to which African scholars cannot have access unless they trade off their intellectual integrity and human conscience. Clearly, it would take a lot of philosophic reflectivity to fathom the depth of the issues that confront African thinkers, but this can only be started if we claim philosophic reflectivity.

³⁸Mogobe Ramose, 2002, 2.

tion as our own and help each other to use the tool of reflection that served our forebears in developing some of the various wonders of the world found in Africa which archaeologists and classists have celebrated and that is only gradually being acknowledged by those who have oppressed and expropriated us for so long. Professor Mogobe B. Ramose³⁹ succinctly expresses what might happen if we do not take immediate heed and address these issues up front. He argues,

It also means that misery, that is to say, the condition of deadly but preventable poverty and hunger shall be imposed upon the indigenous conquered people of the former colonies. Having thus imposed misery, the beneficiaries of the unjust wars of colonial conquest have unilaterally declared themselves to possess excellent competence and absolute authority to prescribe solutions to the injustice of misery.⁴⁰

There is an absolute need to engage with the philosophical challenges that have arisen over the past centuries consequent upon the evils of intellectual denial, negation, appropriation, dispossession and manumission, in order to counteract the consequences of misery. This will help to enlighten even the ignorant in the West (and there is extreme ignorance in the most unlikely of places in Western intellectual and political circles) that informed and diligent scholars in Western history have been conscious and honest enough to acknowledge the intellectual competence and creativity of peoples of other continents outside of Europe.

Speaking of enlightening the ignorant in Western academia, one must understand that this can only take place where there is willingness on the part of the academics involved. Where one such is a victim of deliberate self-delusion there is very little that can be meaningfully done to educate such a person, for many people read only what they want to read and utilize what fits into their preconceived conclusions.

This is the only probable explanation I can conjecture for the utilization of Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*, while his other writings remain unpopular or receive scant reference. For Rousseau (in *A Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences*, 1750), did not have his vision clouded by the fog of racial prejudice and he acknowledged with astute clarity the philosophical, scientific and intellectual leadership of Egypt, without the bogey of "Africa South of the Sahara", or the excision of Ancient Egypt from its parent continent. Nor did he locate that ancient civilization in the Caucasoid Mediterranean or in the Middle East or, even worse, in the Orient as many confused Western scholars are wont to do. On more than one occasion he had cause to refer to the rot in Europe as emanating from a failure on the part of Europe to learn from Egypt lessons that are primordial and eternally valid. For example, he says,

Take Egypt, the first school of mankind, that ancient country, famous for its fertility under a brazen sky; the spot from which Sesostrius once set out to conquer the world. Egypt became the mother of philosophy and the fine arts; soon she was conquered by

³⁹See Ramose, 2002.

⁴⁰Ramose, 2002, 2.

Cambyes, and then successively by the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, and finally the Turks.⁴¹

Though Rousseau had a theory concerning the main reasons for the conquest of Egypt and other civilizations that fall prey to a decadent cultural practice, especially those which do not know the proper ways to treat arts and sciences, the important point that we wish to note here is the fact that while Rousseau acknowledged the contributions of Egypt to arts and sciences (and wanted France and Europe to learn from the mistakes of allowing arts and sciences to become master to humanity) his compatriots suffer from arrant ignorance and intellectual laziness, laced with a high dose of dishonesty borne of blind racial prejudice. In section two of the same work, Rousseau had the following to say,

An ancient tradition passed out of Egypt into Greece, that some god, who was an enemy to the repose of mankind, was the inventor of the sciences. What must the Egyptians, among whom the sciences first arose, have thought of them?⁴²

Clearly, Rousseau was not remiss in underscoring the fact that Greece learnt most, if not all, that it knew from Egypt. There remains only to make the tangential point that while the political ideas of Rousseau have been classified in the same category as Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau had a very negative impression of the greatness of many scholars that have remained very influential in the intellectual history of the West.

Thus, while not endorsing what appears to be his absolute condemnation of the place of art in society, it is clear that his apprehension is justified, as the West has regressed into cultural implosion. This is evident in the values that have been promoted, the ethical codes embraced, the gender relations of reproductive idiosyncrasy and glorification of perversion in the name of preference and human rights, the arts that have evolved, the sciences and technologies that have been developed. Over time, the position of Rousseau has become even more justified, as it has been a self-fulfilling prediction regarding the Western relationship with the arts and the sciences.

One minor final point is in order here. The issue of philosophical originality is a pseudo meta-philosophical digressive issue. I have argued elsewhere that the search for the first human group to philosophize is a useless search and a time-wasting racist diversion.⁴³ It is like asking which has precedence in the chicken and egg matter. The only reason why we feel the need to emphasize the Egyptian intellectual heritage as predating Greek heritage and as the probable most influential intellectual source for Greek intellectual development, given the historical data regarding that period, is to correct the false theory of the *tabular rasa* supposition of the mind of ancient Africans

⁴¹Ramose, 2002, 8.

⁴²Rousseau, *A Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences*. New York: St. Martin Press. 1750, 15.

⁴³See Bewaji, "A Critical Analysis of the Philosophical Status of Yoruba Ifa Literary Corpus," *Weiner Reihe* Vol. VI, (1992): 142-155.

(South of the Sahara, as that derogatory nomenclature would have it) and the empty baggage syndrome of the coloured peoples forcibly brought as slaves and indentured servants to the so-called new world. This factor is more relevant in a world that emphasizes patent, invention, copyright, acknowledgment and royalties for intellectual property. While Africa may not as yet be in a position of strength to ask for repayment of the intellectual royalties for her contribution to human intellectual heritage and the development of the so-called revolutions that have made the West industrial giants today, it must be pointed out that with proper leadership, Africa and Africans everywhere in the world will realize their intellectual and natural potentialities. It is for this reason that we need to not just cultivate philosophy as it is done in the West today (in order not only to show that philosophy is a human expression of the intrinsic capacity for reason, but one that is found in all societies and in all cultures) but, more importantly, and this bears emphasis, to ensure that we do not just ape the West, but continue to encourage African progeny to see the virtues in African intellectual and cultural heritage. This heritage is very humane, civilized, scientific and regarding of other i.e. accommodating of diversity and respectful of the humanity of others in so far as they exhibit clear markers of *Omoluabi* or *botho*, both of which mean a “highly cultured person” in Yoruba and Setswana languages.

African Philosophy in Intellectual Discourse

The history of African philosophy has been chequered for many reasons, and meta-philosophical issues have occupied prime time discussion space in place of real philosophical engagements. For this reason, we will take a very short space here to review the phases of the history of Philosophy in Africa over the last century, because it is clear that African philosophy cannot be fully discussed without clearing the space of cobwebs. We will undertake these under the following headings: denial of historicity of African philosophy, false equation of rationality with Western humanity, educational perpetuation of falsehood, science and information technology as instrument of domination, and the new questioning of received dogma. I will discuss these seriatim and briefly.

In the first place, the scourge of amnesia in Western intellectual circles meant that African precedents and antecedents of Western civilization, science, philosophy, art, culture, and religion got lost somewhere in the collective memory of Europe in her desire to pillage, rape and destroy mother Africa after being weaned on the nurturing laps of Africa. For this reason, African history, culture, science and civilization only began when Europe finally started foraging in the Atlantic. And European historians of culture and intellectual heritage (from Russell to Copleston, and from Locke to McBride) were collectively afflicted by this cerebral challenge as they participated in the collective self-deception that was conducive of the sustenance of the false advantages they enjoyed. This was the phase of affirmation by Europeans of the non-existence of systems of thought different from European ways of understanding and explaining reality—and, by extension, the denial of the existence of African philosophy. Second, attuned as it was toward the destructive individualism (lamented by Karl Marx

but glorified by Rawls) that breeds a false sense of democracy, which makes the poor the fools in the scheme of deception set up to opiate the sense of justice of the masses of dispossessed, Europe replaced, among others, human history with European history, human culture with European culture, human civilization with European civilization, human rationality with European rationality, human science with European scientific revolution, and human philosophy with European philosophy. Granting the fact that Europeans had the power and the means to do it (just as the Iraqi invasion is, for President Bush in 2003, doable, while invasion of North Korea was/is not, because North Korea has Nuclear power), Europe not only carried out the deliberate falsification of human history, but it carried out a greater coup, by ensuring that all educational, instructional, propaganda and other machinery were—up to a historical point in time—tuned to singing from the same false page of the humanity of only Europeans. This was the case until the Haitians rebelled and defeated their enslavers over 200 years ago, and until a member of the European family turned the ‘embers’ of violence on other members of the European family in the name of Nazism. Thus, with the deliberate changing (falsification) of the records of human history, and the deliberate teaching of the false dogma of European superiority, peoples of Africa and Africana peoples, where colonization and slavery took place, were persuaded into acceptance of their own intrinsic, innate and natural inferiority; they were persuaded to accept their inability to reason, the weakness of their own indigenous institutions of science, rationality, culture, civilizations and humanity, on the one hand, and on the other, the superiority of the cultures, civilizations, etc., of their oppressors, colonizers and enslavers. The most remarkable element of this is the self-perpetuating capacity of this element of the equation, to the extent that a skewed and falsified notion of humanity seems to have attained the level of eternal truth for humanity, and all efforts to undertake correction seem impotent. This was the stage of the arguments for and against ethno-philosophy.

Third, before long, agents of instruction brought up on falsehood in the various metropolitan educational institutions were unleashed, with expatriate reinforcements and observers, on the hapless victims of imperialism and colonization to teach, preach and enforce the falsehood of European rationality, culture, science and humanity. Thus, following hard on the heels of the Haitian revolution (which, incidentally, the Europeans have never allowed to be really successful, except nominally), and the revelation of the equality of humans faced with imminent death in the trenches of the allied forces against Hitler in the two European wars for which proxies were sought to fight in all parts of the world, the untenability of the continued acceptance of the falsehood of European prerogative to rationality, science, civilization and culture was revealed. This has led to the mushrooming of alternative approaches to the understanding of humanity, cultures, civilizations, intellectual heritages, science, art and reality. And this has also led to new ways of ensuring the subjugation of peoples of other climes, especially Africana peoples. This led to what C. S. Momoh has called African logical neo-positivism in African philosophy.

Fourth, the new enslavement, colonization, and imperialism has moved into a whole new phase, one in which advocates of domination of one group of humanity by another have gone cyber, and are now in total command of the fate of the hapless poor 'others'. This new phase is far more complicated than anything humanity has witnessed in millennia past, and because of that, it calls for more creativity and perseverance in understanding, deconstructing and prevention than previous eras. Because of the sophistication of the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of thought developed to ground this new era of human domination and heartless destruction of other humans, it has direct relationship to the barring of the African philosophical discourse from meaningfulness in that it is through this ingress that we would want to analyze the history of African philosophy and the hiatuses that have surrounded the development and acceptance of this intellectual discipline in academia over the last century. This has manifested in the valiant efforts of two categories of people – the political philosophers on the one hand, and the historical-philosophical researchers on the other hand.

Finally, the combined growth of scholarship in Africa, especially in West and East Africa, has led to traditions of thinking that are remarkable in both depth and breadth. This is the fifth phase of the history of Philosophy in Africa, which is the contemporary generation of thinkers who are often a bi-product of all of the above. They are often found to speak with a cacophony of diversity of interest and affiliations, while, being more critical and reflective of the heritage of post-modernism and post-structuralism, they forge new ideas in novel ways.

Historio-Genesis in African Philosophy

What, it may be asked, have the five issues raised to do with African philosophy? Beginning with the first, we will take them in order, to show their relevance. This refers to when the idea of the so-touted primitive, irrational, illogical, and barbarous, savage and childish mentality of Africans was hashed from the crucible of the need to find resilient people to work on the plantations of the new world after European colonizers had subjected the original inhabitants (Arawaks, Tainos, Amerindians, etc.) of this new world to premeditated genocide. Using a combination of the "biblical" ideology of the Hamitic hypothesis, inhuman greed and ignorance, the gradation of human colour was developed, perfected, given religious sanctity and offered to the mercantile group (mostly unintelligent mercenaries like Columbus) as gospel truth, and sent forth to destroy other humans. The direct result of this escapade was the development of such efforts as those exemplified in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*, Hegel's diabolic views of and about black peoples, and Robin Horton's *Patterns of thought in Africa and the West*.

A few examples will illustrate this. In 1865, Dean Farrar told Europeans that,

the features of Africans were *invariable and expressionless*, their minds *characterized by a dead and blank uniformity*, ... Africans had not *originated a single discovery*,

*nor promulgated a single thought, nor established a single institution, ... and not hit upon a single invention.*⁴⁴

In the same vein, the first British High Commissioner to East Africa, Sir Charles Elliot, described the mind of Africans as a *Tabular rasa* – a blank void. For him, Africans needed to be taught how to live as humans. For this reason, Bishop Mackenzie was given the task of teaching Africans how to cultivate their land.⁴⁵ Lucien Levy Bruhl's understanding of Africans was so scandalous that it can only evoke outrage. For him, his entire life must be devoted to showing the radical disparity between the nature and quality of mind of the European and what he described as the *primitive mentality* of non-Western peoples and cultures of the world. Africans have what he called *pre-logical* mentality that is not conscious of any form of infraction of the Aristotelian laws of logic. How else would one understand the confusion by Africans of twins with monkeys, or the association of the human head to other objects different from and occupying a different space from the real physical head housing our brains? If Africans have no awareness of laws of logic as identified by Aristotle – identity, contradiction, and excluded middle – it can only be because of their intrinsic incapacity for rational thought, and consequent sub-humanity.

Because of this, it was clear that what was conceived as an economic convenience had become an intellectual matter which needed clear theorization. As mentioned earlier, the whole gamut of intellectual capacity and being was denied by Europe to Africa— history, civilization, culture, literature, art, science, mathematics, language, morality, identity and all. In doing so, Europe undertook to efface thousands of years of African civilization and development. The people they took from Africa to the new world were tagged with the “Empty Baggage Syndrome” label— indicating that they were brought to the new world from the “Dark Continent” to work for the civilized European who would now endow them with religion, culture, education, and capacity to survive the imminent death that would have been their fate in their own continent, left to their own whims under such circumstances as existed in Africa. While Europe was busy taking from Africa, it was carefully and successfully destroying the sources of the intellectual materials that it was taking, or, at least, effort was made honestly to so do.

Since philosophy is the epitome of intellectual development, for the West (in whose mind the tool is more important than its purpose, and the messenger more important than the message) it was not possible to find it elsewhere apart from Europe; not least in Africa, whose inhabitants are no different from oversized animals who have managed by some accident to be bipeds. Thus, philosophy was a white, middle-aged, middle-income, male thing—all of which groups are only present in Europe!

⁴⁴J. A. Bewaji, “African Philosophy ...”, 322.

⁴⁵J. A. Bewaji, “African Philosophy ...” 322. (Italics mine for emphasis)

This position was carefully represented by the Belgian missionary, Placide Tempels,⁴⁶ in *Bantu Philosophy* when he said,

We do not claim, of course, that the Bantus are capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is.⁴⁷

The force of what Tempels was saying becomes more poignant when we bear in mind that this was being done at a time when many African countries were attaining independence from various colonial powers. Tempels looked at the ideas found in the thought systems of the Bantu people, and concluded that the Bantus are too inane to understand that what they were thinking about constituted philosophy or was philosophical. For one thing, Bantu language had no competent vocabulary beyond possibly grunts and guffaws, and could not competently present philosophical ideas. And, for another thing, Europeans must therefore be magnanimous enough to tell the Bantu what was in their thoughts, as that was not coming out clearly. Thus, we should be eternally grateful to Tempels for exhuming and unfurling the Bantu group thought for Western society to see – as elements of latent reflection which can only come out clearly once they are transmuted into the language of the superior humans from the northern hemisphere.

Believing in the use of English language, Robin Horton was even clearer in his idea that Africans were incapable of philosophical reflection. He says, as recently as 1993, that,

And comparisons between such thought-systems required a *standard, universally-current medium*. Both of these considerations dictated that the thought-systems of the various peoples of the world be translated into terms of a 'world' language. And for the time being, 'world' language meant Western language.⁴⁸

Working within the time and age when Africa was regarded as the Dark Continent from which no good could come, it was no shock to see Horton in 1993 holding fast to ideas which were so patently false. In the above passage, Horton proclaims, with such a ridiculous affectation of superiority, that the "standard universally-current medium" in which comparison of any intellectual tradition can take place, and in which investigations about the sanity of whole races can be conducted, is "a world" language, which is a "Western Language". If pressed, it is clear that "standard universally-current medium", "world" language and "Western language" are all euphemisms which refer to "Anglo-American English language", in spite of the original historiogenesis of the English language in the gutter of a ghetto. All the various references in

⁴⁶See Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959.

⁴⁷P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 36.

⁴⁸Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought...*, 2.

the passage do not mean French, German, Portuguese, Spanish, minority Hungarian or other Western, Central or Eastern European language. “World” and “standard, universally-current” are specific to English as the only civilized medium of dialogue, in a way not totally dissimilar to how Hitler thought of Aryan as the language probably spoken by the hosts of heaven. To show that the African people are immune to intellectual discourse and the importunate strains of logic, Horton indicates:

Thus, whereas a Kalabari would be as contemptuous as we should of someone who talked about a table as being in two places at one time, he would not be so of someone who said the same thing of a spirit: for instance, the dead, who are thought to exist ‘in spirit’ only, can be talked of without any sense of contradiction as both ‘in the sky with God’ and as ‘in the burial ground’ where experts may communicate with them ... Many other *gods of primitive peoples* could be cited as resembling the Kalabari Water-People in their thorough-going materiality.⁴⁹

What comes out of this subsection is that there was a time when it was anathema to think of African philosophy as an intellectual possibility or as a discipline, as such thinking would contradict the orthodoxy of the period when Europe was not only expansionist in orientation, but was busy discovering peoples of other climes who were not sure they existed at all – in the way Mungo Park discovered the Niger for the poor inhabitants of West Africa and Columbus discovered the Americas for Amerindians, Tainos, Arawaks, etc., which brought them only grief and genocide. The generosity of the civilizing mission of the Europeans has not made it possible for other humans in other climes to be aware of their own humanity, nor of their culture, language, art, history, literature, music, science, technology, religion, nor most importantly, of their philosophy which is not being revealed to them in the white man’s language, but it has made it possible for humanity to realize the possible inhumanity of human beings to each other where there are no opposition powers to moderate the powers of those in control at any historical point in time in any human interaction.

Ethno-Philosophy

There are two ways of understanding ethno-philosophy. The first one, in my judgment, is derogatory and palpably misleading; the second sense, I think, is more accurate and neutral, because it identifies the right context of the development of philosophical and other ideas that originate with individuals in societies. In the first sense, ethno-philosophy is used to describe the thoughts of peoples other than Europeans, especially where the philosophical ideas originated in these societies are not ascribable to particular individual authorship. It is like the Orwellian “group think”, where “our elders”, “Ifa”, “Yoruba” or “Ibo” people, are the originators of ideas, and not Sodipo or Makinde or Bewaji. Thus, when the Western scholar is confronted with an aesthetic, ethical, epistemological or metaphysical theory embraced by an African

⁴⁹Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought...*, 24-25.

scholar or society or group and asks, 'Where did the idea or theory originate from?' or 'Who propounded the idea?', and the scholar cannot present an author, then it means that no one authored the idea, and by extension, the idea lacks provenance, justification, validity and sense. On the other hand, if the idea were to have clear universality, it is assumed by the Western scholar to probably have been passed from the European tradition – scholarship tradition – to the African through the usual route of diffusion, even when the diffusion process is not properly documented.

Efforts to discover ethno-philosophy have been profuse, and have derived from the efforts of Placide Tempels, Robin Horton, John Mbiti, and Bolaji Idowu, among others. These efforts clearly belong to the scholarship that may properly be called anthropological, archaeological and theological genre, as the scholars in the category were mostly Christian anthropologists and archaeologists, who thought they were also philosophers helping African peoples to discover their philosophies. A lot of effort has been made to legitimize ethno-philosophy in the negative sense we are mentioning here, especially through the work of H. Odera Oruka in the Sage Philosophy format, while others, like Hountondji and Bodunrin have assiduously worked to undermine the format, because of its intrinsic weakness in reifying group philosophy to the status of philosophy proper.

One major appeal of ethno-philosophy has been the gratuitous effort it undertakes to seemingly grant Africana peoples rationality, albeit a different kind which allows Europeans to keep the good form while Africans retain the inferior one, simply because of the inferiority of their intellectual make-up. Just like the recent vilification of Islam and Muslims, the patronizing form would not denigrate Islam but claim that the adherents of the faith are a different people, hence their acceptance of the teachings of Islam, which is a religion, though of an inferior kind to Christianity. In similar fashion, Horton, Tempels, Senghor, Kagame, Idowu and Mbiti would promote the view that Africans have a different way of relating to science, religion and reality; an understanding of which is essential to the appreciation of the needs of Africans for tutelage under the superior European intellectual fountain of wisdom. Thus, the efforts of these scholars to develop Bantu Philosophy by Tempels, authentic African Negritude by Senghor or Intellectualist thesis by Horton are feeble efforts of this kind to find alternative rationality for Africans. This confused effort assumes that the wise Lord Hertford, who would bet on the cheating player in a game of dice, is not playing exactly the same game as the person who prays for the success of an effort in agriculture, even while recognizing that rainfall is essential to plant growth and successful harvest!

On the other hand, there is the view, which I share, that every philosophy is a product of a culture, a time or period, an age, a civilization, a scientific and technological historiography and a metaphysical iconography. In this regard, there is a positive ethno-philosophical strand in every philosophy, regardless of the effort of the Western individualistic proclivity for patent and copy-right to hijack for personal gain what is communally derived. What I mean here is that the philosophy of Socrates

could only have derived from a person living 500 years before Christ. Though there are senses in which ideas could be ahead of their times, this is only possible when you retroactively and proactively factor in various elements of education, culture, technology, science and other facets of the trappings of humanity at the time of the idea's conception. I will illustrate the point I am making to show that the imposition of one perspective of contemplating authorship and credit need not be a good thing, especially where other possible ways of understanding intellectual heritage are considered.

Imagine, for example, that I sit in the pub with a group of students and colleagues to eat or drink, and in the process of our conversation I derive some philosophical insight, and I return to my study to craft the ideas, in a language that is mutually shared, within a mutually shared cultural context of making meaning and sense. I then send the product to a journal, which evaluates the arguments and conclusions and decides to publish my ideas, ascribing the ideas to me because I was the one who has sent the paper to them. What would happen is that I now have authorship of a great idea, and I am acknowledged as a great scholar and philosopher, while the persons and culture and society that make the conception of the idea possible, in the first instance, receive no credit at all. I could become famous, wealthy and renowned on the basis of this publication, and to the West, this is how scholarship should be done and this is how credit should be given. So, what is being contested is the individual authorship, credit and reward mechanism of the West as being the only way of relating to intellectual effort, and hence, if there is any other culture that looks at property, wealth, creativity and heritage differently, that culture need not be inferior or backward. In fact, under other circumstances it may be that this culture is superior to the perniciously individualistic one, whose philosophy is more narrowly academic than relevant to human experience.

Further, I recognize the fact that humans operate on a multiplicity of planes at the same time, moving from one plane to another, depending on what would serve the particular need of the occasion. Thus, an engineer who is aware of the precise forces at play in a mechanical engine would see nothing wrong with praying for a safe return before embarking on a journey, just as a boxer might not step into the ring to face an opponent until the sign of the cross has been made at the beginning of every round. Often, where the ideas come from and what validates one practice but invalidates the other is never clarified, and movement from approbation of one to condemnation of the other is never closely examined, thereby making it possible to not only confuse similar ideas but to appraise them unequally.

African Neo-Logical Positivism

Following the much-criticized efforts of the ethno-philosophers are their critics, who take on the first strand of ethno-philosophy we have elicited above, and conclude that such philosophy is not any better than folk-tales, mythologies and mysticism. We remember logical positivists as those thinkers of the Vienna Circle who attempted to make philosophy a scientific venture by excising from it all metaphysical thinking. Their followers in African philosophy wanted also to remove any unscientific ele-

ments from African philosophy, by insisting on logic, science and analysis as the hallmarks of philosophical reflection, such that any efforts which fail to meet these requirements would fail to be philosophical. Hence, persuaded that there is only one way of doing philosophy, and unmindful of the fact that what is attributed to their mentors in Anglo-American philosophical tradition are privatized ideas of ethno-societies (in the second sense we examined above), they take as gospel truth, positivism and its agenda of turning philosophy into a scientific enterprise – even after this enterprise has failed woefully in Europe. They assume that there is only one way in which humans should confront, think about and solve life problems and understand experiences. Brainwashed as they were, they go along with the Hortonian supposition that writing, formal logic, linguistic analysis, individualized reflection and idiosyncratic retrospections of the Cartesian demented type are the only way humans of all cultures and societies must do philosophy. They easily forget that even in Europe there are various traditions of philosophical reflection, which fail to obey the same laws of thought or expression without being irrational, illogical or unreflective!

The thinkers in this category are diverse and of complex hues, from Horton to Makinde, from Hountondji to Gbadegesin, from Wiredu to Bodunrin. Coming from the background of analytic tradition, and failing to be able to transcend this tradition, they were all enamoured with the idea that all philosophy must follow the shallow British logic-chopping, abstract and dry pattern of weaving ideas that only those in their disciplines are able to relate to. They held as standard the kind of disquisitions that would be attributable to Russell and Whitehead in their discussion of types, forgetting that reality presents differently to individuals in different cultures and is expressed and appreciated differently depending on interests, needs and predicaments.

Logical positivism failed miserably in Western philosophy. Equally, African-neo-logical positivists have fared no better in their effort to remove from African philosophy those aspects of thinking which science cannot adequately account for. In fact, the developments in science have effectively shown the weakness of any form of thinking which would delimit a priori what humans can think!

African Political Philosophy and Historians of African Philosophy

There are two categories of scholarship that have followed the trajectories that we have examined in the last three parts of this section. This statement relates to the efforts of those regarded as the pioneers in the liberation struggles of Africa and their kindred partners in the new world of the West Indies and USA. These are the thinkers and political actors like Senghor, Nyerere, Nkrumah, Awolowo, Azikiwe, Cabral, Garvey, Du Bois, Blyden, Diop, Van Sertima, Mazrui, Clarke, ben Jochanan, Fanon, and Rodney, who were involved in the liberation struggles politically and intellectually, and who wrote down ideas which are to be regarded as philosophical in the extreme. Though many African students of philosophy and history may not be reading their thoughts and contributions, this is not their fault but a consequence of the success of the colonial and imperialist project which has made African intellectual leadership only capable of parroting whatever their master's voice had ever voiced in their hearing – like the old gramophone!

In this regard, we must pay attention to the philosophic disquisitions of these Africana thinkers, as they are important not only within the time period of their thinking, but also as contributors to world political philosophy. In formulating their ideas they showed that African indigenous cultures were deserving of theorizing philosophically, and that such theorizing could constitute the foundation of the development of humanity from the perspectives of the experiences that are African in origin and original in orientation.

There are various elements in their thoughts, but what I want to indicate here is that we should begin to engage these thoughts for the purpose of the elevation of Africa. In the contemporary educational practice of Africa, we study the ideas of foreign cultures at our peril if we fail to study our own ideas as a springboard to development. In this regard, the works of thinkers like Ramose on Ubuntu, as a social, political, cultural, ethical, metaphysical and epistemological instrument for comprehending reality, are significant. When this studying of indigenous ideas is taken on board along with the literatures developed by the thinkers we have mentioned earlier, we begin to gain better insight into the proper nature of humanity in our context.

Contemporary African Philosophical Thought

The contemporary African philosophical situation is very complex. What I am doing here is just to highlight signposts, so that the interested student and reader will be stimulated to research further. A number of significant developments have taken place in the last decade. African philosophy has not only gained recognition as a deserving discipline, but also a lot of internationally renowned scholars have sprung up, making for intellectual excitement and profusion of scholarship— even though some of the writings are not of the highest quality. I will call attention only to those deserving of study.

Wiredu's *Cultural Universals and Particulars*⁵⁰ is a very important document in this regard. It not only addressed a critical issue of particularism masquerading as universalism, but it also helped indicate that each individual perspective may become problematic when it presumes itself to be the only truth. His discussion of Akan theory of truth is significant in this respect. Odera Oruka's *Sage Philosophy* is unique in many respects. Differing from Griule's *Conversations with Ogotomeli* in the sense that the sages of African cultures have voices of their own, and do not depend on the interpretations of the interlocutor to make sense, Oruka championed the path of attending to the wisdom of indigenous African peoples. One could also mention the effort of Taiwo regarding African philosophy of Law, which emerged set against an attempt to look at the contrast between individualism and group approach to jurisprudence.

⁵⁰Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

The contributions of such thinkers as Diop, Van Sertima, ben Jochanan, Clarke, Garvey, Rodney, Fanon and others are important as they help place in perspective the issues that led to the domination of our world by outsiders, who are then regarded as not only beacons of light but purveyors of truth, even when all they bring us is impoverishment and intellectual enslavement.

While we are interested in such branches of philosophy as logic, epistemology, metaphysics and ethics, many of our institutions of learning fail to engage the critical elements of culture such as aesthetics. In this regard, Bewaji's *Beauty and Culture* remains *sui generis* and an interesting read for every student of Africana culture. His latest work in Epistemology (Bewaji 2007) is also in this category of 'a first', providing an alternative approach to the study and critical reflection issues about knowledge from an Africana perspective.

In addition, the works of Lewis R. Gordon, from *Her Majesty's Other Children* and *Existence in Black to Not only the Master's tools*, are most important to any student of philosophy from an Africana background. Apart from these, many good anthologies are out there, and Wiredu's *Companion to African Philosophy*, Mosley's *African Philosophy*, and Momoh's *The Substance of African Philosophy* make tremendous contributions to the philosophical literature in Africa. Hallen and Sodipo's *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft* is a significant contribution to the phenomenological understanding of African philosophy.

Branches of African Philosophy

Historically the following have been the branches of African philosophy, as a consequence of the evolution of philosophy in the African continent at the tertiary education level. This should not be taken to mean that they are the only possible branches, but given the history of colonialism and the success of the colonial project, the nature and tenor of philosophy in Africa has not been as dependent on endogenous factors as on exogenous ones. Let us list the big areas first and comment briefly on each:

History of African Philosophy

The fact that many of the students of philosophy in Africa do not write philosophy in their mother tongue (and probably cannot read or write it) is responsible for the absence of serious historical documentation of African philosophy beyond the effort of Sumner in Ethiopia. In this regard, we not only contribute to the loss of African philosophy, we are the agents of the destruction of African philosophy because of our complicity in the ignoring of the intellectual traditions of our societies and cultures. Thereby we deride ethno-philosophy gratuitously without helping to protect the traditions that gave birth to us, while we celebrate Russell, Ayer, Sartre, Plato, etc., without caring to engage with even those who were responsible for our liberation only yesterday – such as Awolowo, Nkrumah, Nyerere, etc. When we do not engage seriously with the History of African philosophy, how can we engage meaningfully with African philosophy of history?

Epistemology

Every society has its ways of knowing, justifying claims to knowledge, understanding truth and evidence. The fact that we are so concerned with the epistemologies of Euro-American thinkers without looking into the generation, validation and documentation of knowledge from our own cultural background speaks volumes about the total capitulation of our intelligentsia to the metropolitan agendas of the West toward perpetual domination of our lives. While we should study epistemology as a universal branch of philosophy, we should domesticate whatever we read so that we do not continue to live like fish out of water or a headless chicken capable only of rolling aimlessly around for a while before rigor mortis takes over.

I have already mentioned Hallen and Sodipo's book, which constitutes a clear attempt to map the epistemology of the Yoruba. Wiredu has attempted similar reflections in his *Philosophy and an African culture* and *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, while Gyekye and Bedu Addo have also contributed to the discussion of epistemology in Akan language philosophy. My *Introduction to Theory of Knowledge – toward a pluricultural analysis*⁵¹ is the first effort, as far as I know, to provide a text that is culturally relevant and critical of received epistemologies, on the one hand, and indigenous epistemological reflections and practice on the other.

Logic and Methodology

Every intellectual and cognitive enterprise has internal logic and methodology. Whether it is in religion, business, technology, science, art, politics, or sex, there is bound to be a logic of relations to self, to others, to things and to reality. Understanding the logic of these things makes practice, development of ideas and growth of knowledge possible.

While in philosophy there is the specialized, technical field of investigation called "logic", it is often forgotten that logic is derived from how humans think, and how humans use language to represent thoughts and ideas about reality. The refinement of the language that communicates, into a technical formal medium, is a consequence of the need to be precise, and to shed a lot of the emotional and unnecessary baggage that goes with ordinary language. As a consequence, the formalization of language and the application of this formalism to the development of computers, theoretical mathematics and logic are extensions that perform the utilitarian purpose of advancing human capability to deal with reality. While it is possible for this formal system to become an end in itself, such luxuries often become tendentious when they are reified to the level of gospel truths, as there are as many logics, mathematical systems and formal representations as one may feel inclined to develop. The presentations of Euclid and Lobachevsky are signal examples here, and they show why the so-called Aristotelian system would not account for the logic of contradiction developed by Hegel and Marx.

⁵¹See J. A. Bewaji, *An introduction to Theory of Knowledge-toward a Pluricultural Analysis* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2007).

What I am saying, therefore, is that African philosophers should transcend the narrow limits of deference to Western imposed paradigms of thinking, to encourage themselves and their students to see that thought and practice need clear synchronization of methodologies and logical foundations in order to enable belief, behaviour and action to be grounded in clearly defensible and justifiable opinions, if not knowledge.

The efforts of Makinde, Oke and Ocaya are commendable in this regard, but these efforts are aimed at replicating Euro-American presentations of technical logic in African contexts. While there is nothing wrong with showing that indigenous African thinkers and languages obey the basic laws of thought that European philosophers have identified, it can clearly become a debilitating obligation if all that is found desirable is just such mere replication and not creative understanding of how Africans handle ideas that are strange or different from those commonplaces that Europeans have had to deal with. For example, it may be interesting to understand the logic behind the personal, public and religious attention to colonialism, land-grabbing by European settlers in various Eastern and Southern African societies, HIV/AIDS, homosexuality/buggery/sodomy, slavery, racism, gender issues, political oppression and non-accountability associated with Western versions of democracy and religious intolerance and oppression that have suffused the African mind and landscape since the start of the interface between Africa and Europe on the one hand, and Africa and Islam on the other. African philosophers would have to undertake critical and incisive investigation into these profound issues if they are to transcend the limitations of pedantry and irrelevant logic-chopping of the West.

Metaphysics

There has been a lot written about African ontology, cosmology, cosmogony and religious universe, but not much has been done concerning African intellectual metaphysical constructs as philosophy in themselves. *Bantu Philosophy* did not regard the reflections of the Bantu as efforts in metaphysical reasoning per se, rather it was emphatic in dealing with the exotic, strange and incredible in the ideas of the Bantu in relating to their existential universe, causation and causality, along with theories of action and behaviour in the cultural context of the Bantu. In this sense, most of the discussions of African ideas about God, mind, determinism, reality, etc., were done on the assumption that Africans had no idea they were philosophically dealing with issues that were fundamental to their lives, as they could not even begin to think philosophically in the first instance, as their languages and their logical reflection were inadequate for dealing with such issues.

The fact that most African philosophers were either Christian or Muslim in background was a disadvantage which limited their philosophical reflection to either interpretation of indigenous ideas in Christocentric/Eurocentric terms or to resisting the challenge of doing this, while at the same time finding blocks to unpatronizing investigation of issues. This dilemma has prevented proper exploration of the ideas that are important in understanding human beliefs and behaviour in interpersonal, local, national or international domains.

Axiology: Ethics, Eesthetics, Social and Political Philosophy

In recent years, efforts have been made to investigate African axiology whereas previous efforts only studied the ethics of Socrates, Aristotle, Kant and Hume or the aesthetics of Plato and Collingwood or the social and political philosophy of Plato, Hobbes, Locke and Rawls. Recent efforts have paid attention to the nature of morality discourses in African situations and intellectual environment by thinkers such as Oluwole and Bewaji; African reflections on aesthetics such as in the works of Bewaji, Nzegwu and Nwodo, and political and social philosophy in Africa by the statesmen philosophers such as Nyerere, Nkrumah and Awolowo on the one hand, and on the other, the thoughts of academics such as Taiwo, Bewaji, Ramose and others. What has impelled this kind of philosophical effort has been the discovery, at various times, that no people group allows others to reflect their thoughts for them, and that any such abdication of intellectual responsibility is unconscionable and would have disastrous consequences for the society that allows it to happen. However, there are still many aspects of such reflection that are not being done. For example, while Ramose has been able to lead the reflection regarding business ethics using Ubuntu, this has not been a common form of philosophical practice by African thinkers. We have not engaged philosophically with the parlous situation of African political and economic experience, nor have we attempted a critical and philosophical analysis of the various aspects of the HIV/AIDS problem in Africa.

Apart from this, general philosophy of value in Africa does not seem to be gaining the kind of traction that it deserves, and there does not seem to be a commitment to taking the issues of Africa to the axiological level of reflection that will stimulate students and leaders to pause to reflect about action and behaviour. This is a serious challenge that must be confronted head-on if Africa is not to continue to be perpetually the door-mat for all other peoples of the earth. Areas that cry out for investigation are environmental ethics, leadership ethics, sports ethics, bio-ethics, law-enforcement ethics, ethics of conflict resolution, ethics of land ownership and property rights. Students of philosophy are necessarily called upon to lead these discussions and they cannot shirk the responsibility they owe to society in this regard.

Application of Philosophy to the Disciplines

While we could be accused of being over-concerned with axiology, this would be to ignore the fact that virtually all aspects of life have some axiological presupposition. And the means of reflecting is itself not value free. In this sub-section, what we wish to promote is the need for African philosophers to engage assiduously in the application of Philosophy to other disciplines without allowing others from the outside to dictate the understanding or interpretation of how we should reflect on the issues. This is why I call for a sustained effort to deal with issues in the Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Education, Philosophy of Science, Philosophy of Psychology, Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Information and Communications Technology, Philosophy of Law, Philosophy of Development, Philosophy of Leadership, Philosophy of Sex, Philosophy of Death, Philosophy of International Relations, Philosophy of Sports, Philosophy of Tourism, Philosophy of Language, etc.

If we fail to pay attention to these issues now, we will have to be contented with the efflux from other societies, just as we have embraced the ideas of others which have no relevance to our situations to our own detriment. While the resources may be scarce and there may be political pressure to invest in training in science and technology and in business and computer expertise, we must balance that with the need to understand the forces that moderate human existence in society and the complexities of the potentially beneficial effect of investing in the humanities. Clearly one of the factors that have led to our current threatened demise as a people has been that we have not been able to critically engage with the reflection that would make it possible for us to understand who we are, where we are coming from, where we are, why we are there and where we would wish to be and why we would wish to be there. These are philosophical issues that only careful attention can illuminate.

The Future of African Philosophy and Philosophy in Africa

There are people in leadership positions in Africa who believe that what is important is the development of science and technology, the creation of production machineries and the training of managers, because these all add directly to the growth of the economy. They would think that admissions to our tertiary educational institutions should be 90% science, social sciences and professional disciplines so that Africa could catch up with the West. Nigeria experimented with that ill-advised effort in the past, and the failure of the effort is lesson enough to all who have the interest of Africa at heart to show that what is most important in any society is the human coefficient and how knowledgeable the human capital is in thinking creatively, critically and reflectively about all issues relating to existence. For, what is the profit for a society to have all the science and technology in the world and yet to be humiliated into silence by a cabal of liars who not only fraudulently steal elections but deceive the unsuspecting and unreflective population into going into an illegitimate, un-winable and destructive war in other countries? Why should Africa want to be like the West, a West which has no morality or responsibility in the face of the destruction of other humans in other climes if it contributes to the profit of their depraved business enterprises that hold other societies to ransom? Why should Africa want to be like the West where deviance, perversion and depravity are regarded as preferable even when they clearly risk the demise of the human species as we know it? Why want to be like the West where the only rationale for action is whether or not the end justifies the means, in so far as the thoughtless sea of humanity outside of the West does not realize the multiple standards that govern international trade and relations, only to be subjected to distended, inhuman and irresponsible regimes like the WTO, IMF, World Bank and other agencies of deception and oppression?

It was strange that in the case of Nigeria a cabal of half-wits could prescribe the direction that Nigeria should be going, when they themselves never mastered what rational thought was, nor were they able to understand where Nigeria was coming from, where Nigeria was at that time, or where Nigeria should be going in the future. Clearly, the absence of investment in a critical degree of humane education, and the total destruction of the traditions of good governance and responsible, principled,

decent, accountable and rational leadership have combined to consign a wealthy country to perpetual poverty. The impoverishment of the intellect has led to the impoverishment of the economy, to the extent that Nigeria now ranks among the poorest of nations in the world.

In this regard, the solution to Africa's problems rests in the cultivation of reason in the general population. In the first instance, the general leadership of Africa should go back to school – by bringing the humanities to them in the form of workshops and seminars, and especially by helping them to cultivate the habit of thinking outside of the box, that is, beyond the confines of the quest for power to the possible interrogation of the issue of 'power for what?' This is a philosophical enterprise par excellence, and there is no alternative, as the persistent failure of African leadership to apprehend, comprehend and analyse the reality of the world as it is and as the West wants it to continue to be, and effectively utilize reason in determining long-term self-interest and corporate interest, can be put down to the failure of leadership to embrace critical self-reflection, introspection and rational deliberation about what things matter most to persons and societies.

The young of contemporary society in Africa have been duped into believing that the investment that parents, society and countries put into their education and development is to facilitate their becoming atomic Western robots; that is, becoming independent humans with only a self who makes further demands on society without seeing any need to contribute anything in return to the welfare of others and of society as a whole. Individualism is preached as a Western virtue without showing that it is more a vice than anything else, while it is supposed that it is only in the West that the individual has the capacity for self-realization and development, forgetting that in other (more) civilized cultures, the village that raises a child deserves the child, not forgetting his/her obligation to future children of the village. The export of this critical element of possessive individualism has served to ruin African societies to the extent that African leadership would rather ship their societies' wealth to other shores, without ever wondering whether, if their grandparents had done the same thing, they would be left with anything to steal.

The HIV/AIDS situation in Africa is shameful for various reasons. In the first instance, there are all kinds of irrational beliefs about how to cure the disease, from having sex with a virgin, to taking a bath after sex with an infected person, to believing that mere contact with an infected person could spread the disease, to an absence of empathy for the sick, and to the criminally wicked religion-propagated idea that use of contraceptives (condoms) during sex is ungodly and that the disease is a punishment from God to the sinners of the world! Critical capacity to think is directly important in understanding a number of factors. Some of these relate to the value of life (one's life and the life of others and of society), respect for self and others, responsibility to one's self and to others and to one's society, hopes and aspirations for self, others and society, which often is responsible for efforts at self-preservation and cultivation, valuing of relationships beyond the level of mere sexual gratification, expectations of future enhancement of one's image and that of one's society, and apprecia-

tion of the norms of fairness, equity and justice to others and to society. These are deep issues which only cultivated reflection by way of critical thinking can bring about. While on the side of government, the provision of means for a decent existence is an obligation that is conducive of the legitimization of authority, failing which every citizen should be obliged to take measures to undermine whatever regimes are anti-society and anti-populace.

The challenge of Africa is leadership. When we look at Africa, we find that the total population is less than that of India, yet Africa has a land mass that is 100 hundred times that of India, and resources that are probably 1000 times that of India. Compared with USA, Africa is at least 20 times the size of the former, and with resources that bear comparison with any. But when we look at the per capita income of Africa, it is totally negligible and the standard of living, life span and other critical indices for measuring good living conditions are negative for Africa, compared to other continents. Indeed, Africa has missed out on all targets for development, not because of any innate intellectual deficit or absence of resources, but simply because contemporary African leadership is a pack of thoughtless nincompoops, whose education has not risen beyond their master's voice, and who are only able to ape and parse for whatever is dictated from Paris, New York or some other headquarters of the oppressors of Africa. In this regard, it is important that our analysis of the African situation does not rest with the search for so-called scientific and technological development alone, without including liberated and emancipated humanities in the dynamics of how we develop future generations of African leaders, bearing in mind that the human infant, of all other beings, takes longer to mature and become humanized than other species.

This challenge to the leadership of Africa is not limited to the corridors of power, as even the leadership of educational institutions is not any better, perhaps worse, as some of us celebrate slavery and colonialism as positive events in the annals of African existence. For this reason, it is critical to develop philosophy in Africa beyond the class-rooms of the colleges and universities. In fact, limiting education to 8 hours a day, following the models brought to Africa from the West, while traditional indigenous African education, which took place 24/7, was regarded as informal, uncivilized and backward, has been shown to be part of the problem of Africa.

Thus, our educational infrastructure must enthrone reflection at all levels, and we must encourage our young to dare; we must encourage the philosophical inclination in them right from infancy, without being scared of what they may become. Having instilled in them our cultural roots, they will choose to propagate the good elements in these, while gaining the courage to resist the influence of bad, insane and retrogressive ideas about individuation, individualism, consumerism, perniciously destructive capitalism or perversion of various kinds from other cultures that are currently admired for no reason at all but for the fact that these cultures are transiently dominant.

In conclusion, we should not do what has become the norm in the West, where philosophy is detached from life and is done only in ivory towers by a disconnected and palpably insane group who might, for example wonder why humans do not walk on

their heads and eat each other for dinner after sodomizing each other. Africa must not only encourage the teaching of philosophy in all strata of education, we must encourage the doing of philosophy by all. Clearly our detractors would not like this, because a thinking person is anathema to exploiters, and clearly the political directorate in Africa may find various subterfuges to derail this noble agenda, as it would mean that the population would become difficult to mislead and exploit. But this price is small by comparison with how much effort and resources are being dissipated into various schemes to maintain power at all costs, rather than have a society where obedience to authority does not need coercion.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Moral Theories

Simon Mawondo

Introduction

Moral Philosophy or Ethics is one of the main branches of Philosophy, the others being Metaphysics, Epistemology and Logic. It is part of axiology, which is the study of values. Being a branch of philosophy, moral philosophy partly depends on or utilises some of the arguments from the other areas of philosophy. Moral philosophy is the study of right and wrong. It aims at both understanding the nature of right and wrong in human actions and at helping us conduct our lives in accordance with that understanding. For this reason, it has both a theoretical and a practical dimension. The subject matter of ethics is of fundamental importance in the ordering of personal and social life.

In this chapter I will explain the different types of enquiry that make up the study of ethics, before distinguishing ethics from law and religion. Following that there will be a discussion of the main theories in ethics.¹ Two types of enquiry can be said to characterise this study of right and wrong.

Meta-Ethics

The first type of enquiry focuses on the language we use in making moral judgements. For example, when we say that keeping one's promises is good, are we expressing a fact about keeping promises or we are expressing our own feelings about that kind of action? Are moral values out there in the world so that we can have knowledge about them?

This kind of enquiry is called *meta-ethics*. It is the attempt to understand and explain the nature of morality. When J. L. Mackie² argues that moral values are subjective, in the sense that they are not part of the fabric of the universe, he is making a meta-ethical claim. His contention is that right and wrong, good and bad, are invented by us rather than discovered. This position is called subjectivism or scepticism because it doubts the existence of, or the possibility of, knowledge of a standard of values that

¹The Words 'Ethics' and 'Morality' will be used interchangeably

²See J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

is independent of our valuation. In its extreme form subjectivism says right and wrong are determined by each individual. What is right for you may be wrong for me.

The view that maintains that moral values are objective and that they exist independently of our thinking is called objectivism. Plato's forms are perhaps the clearest example of this. Louis Pojman,³ who argues that right and wrong are discovered, challenges Mackie's argument that moral values are invented. Therefore we can say that one of the differences we encounter in the study of ethics is about the nature of values. One can take a subjective or an objective view of moral values.

The objectivity of moral values can be explained in different ways. One possibility is to argue that some divine being promulgates them. The divine command theory is an example of such a claim. It makes right and wrong dependent on the will of God. Another possible source of the objectivity of values could be that they are part of the nature of things. Natural law theory makes such a claim. It must be understood that these theories do not limit themselves to a single interpretation. Consequently, adherents of these theories still disagree amongst themselves as to what exactly the will of God or natural law dictates in concrete situations. For this reason, claiming that values are objective on any of these grounds does not exempt us from reasoning and having to justify our standpoints.

Other analyses at the meta-ethical level include R. M. Hare's prescriptivism and emotivism. Prescriptivism is the view that ethical statements have prescriptive force. When one says abortion is wrong, one is not stating an objective fact that can be true or false. Rather, one is prescribing conduct. In this case, properly analysed, the statement functions as a prescription. It is equivalent to saying, 'Do not perform abortion.' On the other hand, if one says abortion is good what one means is that one can and should perform an abortion if one wants to. To say abortion is good is equivalent to saying it is permissible.

Emotivism, on the other hand, is the theory that says moral concepts like good and bad express our attitude to particular things or states of affairs. If, for example, someone says stealing is bad, it would be ridiculous for me to go on to ask, 'Should I steal this text on Moral Philosophy from the lecturer's office?' To say something is bad is to express our negative feelings towards that thing. Saying that an action is good expresses our approval of the act. Good and bad, right and wrong, do not in this case refer to specific qualities of actions or the natural world. They express our feelings towards states of affairs and actions. Meta-ethics is therefore a second order activity that reflects on what is happening when people make use of moral concepts. It is theoretical. Analytical philosophers actually believe that the analysis of language is the only thing that the moral philosopher should be engaged in. This view, however, gives a very unsatisfactory representation of ethics as will become clear as we proceed. With these few remarks we can move on to consider the other type of enquiry.

³L. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990).

Normative/Substantive Ethics

The second type of enquiry is interested in more practical concerns. This kind of enquiry is called normative ethics or substantive ethics. Underlying this study of right and wrong is the attempt to order our lives according to a proper understanding of what is right. For this reason it can be said that normative ethics is concerned to answer what Bernard Williams⁴ calls Socrates' question, namely, "How ought we to live?" It is perhaps important to add in this context that this is a question about a life that, for human beings, is worth living. Put simply, the question is, 'What is the good life for human beings?' In answering this question, note should be taken of the fact that in living this good life the individual lives in a community and interacts with others. In that interaction there often occur conflicts of interests and beliefs. For this reason, morality attempts to establish some rules that help us resolve conflicts and live harmoniously in society. One other purpose of moral rules is to try and regulate interactions so that all, or as many people as possible, achieve the good life. Wiredu⁵ brings out this point when he notes, "... human well-being is an irreducible presupposition of all morality."

From the foregoing we can make a few observations about moral theories. Theories in general provide an explanatory scheme for some observed phenomena. Scientific theories such as the theory of evolution explain how species evolved. In science there are standard methods or procedures that must be followed to solve scientific problems. For this reason, scientific questions can be answered with some finality. There is no comparable moral method. One consequence of this is that moral problems cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of all rational minds. Consequently, the ancient problems raised centuries ago and discussed by generations of philosophers still confront anyone interested in moral philosophy. For example, what Williams refers to as Socrates' question, above, still fascinates any serious thinker in morality. It is in the light of these observations that the student of moral philosophy must be ready to critically reflect on some of the most important questions in life. Amongst some of the most interesting questions are questions such as, 'Does justice require that the rich give some of their wealth to help the poor?'; 'Should we tell the truth even when the consequences of doing so could lead to the death of someone we care about?' To tease the mind a little, let us consider the following hypothetical scenario that some people could face in real life.

Imagine that your best friend, who is abroad, confides in you that he has contracted the HIV virus. His wife does not know this, and he does not intend telling her. You know that they plan to have children as soon as they are reunited. Because of this, your friend has ruled out using condoms when he sleeps with his wife because, according to him, this will raise her suspicions. All your efforts to reason with your

⁴B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 1.

⁵K. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 64.

friend and convince him otherwise, or to reveal the truth to his wife, have been in vain. What should you do? Telling the wife the truth could save her life but cost you your friendship. Besides, it means that you will have to break the trust between yourself and your friend. It could also lead to the break-up of your friend's marriage and consequently to unhappiness for yourself, your friend and his wife. Keeping the secret could lead to your friend's wife also contracting HIV and, subsequently, to her death. This could mean that as a result of keeping your promise to your friend, someone loses her life when it was within your power to save her. Would breaking your promise to your friend be interference in someone's private life?

Considering the unwillingness of your friend to disclose his HIV status to his wife, a number of questions may also be raised. Firstly, we can ask whether he is being selfish or treating his wife fairly? He might think that he is acting in his own self-interest, but is this really the case? In this situation we have to look at the long-term interests of the person concerned. Again, what is evident is that there are conflicting concerns and no single principle is likely to yield a totally satisfactory result.

This imagined scenario brings out the fact that in morality there are sometimes conflicting considerations that cause decision-making to be very difficult. Different moral theories try to help us make the right decision and provide a rationale for that decision. The use of such thought experiments is common in moral philosophy. They serve as an aide to help provoke the reader's thought. In all these cases it will become clear that there is no single right answer. That is why moral philosophers differ on a wide range of topics such as abortion, justice and euthanasia.

Whatever moral theory one adopts, it must satisfy the core features of any credible and justifiable morality. Pojman⁶ identifies five such core features. These are prescriptivity, universalizability, overridingness, publicity and practicability. These features will be just briefly explained.

Prescriptivity refers to the fact that moral principles prescribe or command us to do or refrain from doing certain things. In this case the point is that any credible moral principle must be able to tell us what to do.

Universalizability, when referring to moral principles, means such principles must be applicable to everyone in a similar situation. It is a formal requirement of morality that we treat people equally, and the principle of universalizability helps us to achieve this. You might be broke and desperately want money. You know that one of your friends has some money but she /he will not lend it to you unless you promise to give it back by a certain date. In this situation you might be tempted to give a false promise so that you can get the money.

Your reasoning is something like this: unless I tell my friend a lie, she/he will not lend me the money I need. So, in order to get the money, I will tell her/him a lie so that I can get what I want. Universalizability requires that if your friend, or anyone else, is in a similar situation, then it will be permissible for them to do the same. If you do not

⁶L. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*

want your friend to treat you that way, then it is wrong for you to do so. We shall see this idea expressed in Kant's categorical imperative later on in this chapter.

Overridingness is the quality that means that moral obligations tend to take precedence over other types of obligations. For example, if obeying the law requires you to act immorally then the right thing to do would be to break the law. The struggle against injustice often requires that people do just this: think about the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, or the civil rights struggle in the United States of America. Heroes of these struggles, such as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Junior, broke the law but in doing so they were doing the right thing. From this it becomes clear that even though we ordinarily have an obligation to obey the law, moral obligations carry more weight than legal obligations. It also shows that whilst law and morality generally coincide they are not identical.

The purpose of moral rules is to guide conduct, therefore there is no use in having moral principles or rules that are a closely-guarded secret. For this reason, any credible or acceptable moral theory must satisfy the condition of publicity. This means that it must be known.

The fifth condition in Pojman's list is practicability. The point here is that no matter how elegant or plausible our moral theories are, they are useless if they are unable to guide our actions. Whatever the theory that we hold prescribes must be something that people can be reasonably expected to be capable of achieving.

Before I discuss some of the most influential moral theories, it is important that a distinction be made between morality and the law, and between morality and customs.

Politics, Morality and Law

Let us assume that you are the head of a big company involved in the manufacturing sector. The government is considering passing new environmental legislation making it an offence to release untreated effluent into the streams, or even underground. Your company has been releasing untreated water into the stream for years. Breaking this new law will invite a fine that the company can pay without its profit margins being greatly affected. On the other hand, complying with the new law will impose huge costs on your company, at least in the short term. Even though the company can afford to comply by buying new equipment and installing a treatment plant in the production process to treat the effluent, this will cut deeply into its profits. In a situation like this, how should you decide what to do?

There are a number of possibilities you may consider. The first possibility is to comply with the new law. The justification for this could be that we have an obligation to obey the law. In this case, you are not considering whether the law itself is a good law or not. Your decision will be based on the need to obey the law, whatever the content of that law is.

Another possible line of reasoning could be that you comply with the law because it is the right thing to do. Here you are concerned with the rationale behind the law. Because the new law aims at protecting the people from the effects of pollution,

your compliance is justified by the fact that this is a good law. For that reason, complying with it is a good thing.

A third possible course of action is that you pay the fine. The reasoning behind this would be that installing the required treatment plant would be very costly. It is more cost effective to pay the fine than to comply with the law.

Yet another possibility is to use your economic power to try to influence the law-making process.

Politics is sometimes seen as the direct opposite of morality. In other words, it is regarded as a realm of self-interest, greed and struggle for power. However popular this view might be, morality in fact plays a very important role in politics. Politics, law and morality are very closely interconnected. If we look at the scenario just presented we can see how politics, law and morality all come together.

It is the business of politicians to make the law. Moral ideals play a big role in determining what kind of law should be enacted. Once the laws have been made, they become what we call the justice system. It is the job of the judiciary to apply these laws. Therefore it is not strange that we refer to judges as justices. What is important for us to appreciate here is that,

The idea of justice always has an ethical tinge and when it is used in the law, or is applied to the legal system as a whole, it is a reminder that the law, as commonly understood, is not simply a set of any old rules subject to enforcement; law has an ethical purpose and is normally expected to use ethical methods.⁷

In this case, what we are saying is that, in making laws, politicians must take moral considerations seriously. One of the most, if not the most important role politicians perform is to make laws. This is especially true in democratic systems of government. What kind of laws should they make and what ideals should inform their vision of the good society?

In the scenario presented above, should the law-makers pass the new law? In the real world, when such laws are being debated there will be lobbying from companies either to have the proposed law defeated, or at least make the fines affordable. At the international level, it is not difficult to understand why the greatest super-power in the world, which is also the greatest polluter, has not signed some of the United Nations' Protocols on the environment, such as the Kyoto Protocol. Besides lobbying, some companies go so far as to offer bribes to law-makers so that they can influence the debate in a way that is favourable to their interests. This is partly why politicians are sometimes seen as greedy and self-interested people who do not have any morals.

In democratic societies, law can be taken as expressing the sovereign will of a people, aiming at helping them collectively to achieve goals and outcomes that they consider worthwhile. In this respect, if it is accepted that one of the most important responsibilities of our political representatives is to make laws, then it follows that

⁷D. D. Raphael, *Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 68.

such laws impose on us a duty to comply. This duty to comply derives from the fact that such laws are instrumental in helping achieve the good of the community. Added to this, it may also be seen that, despite the popular conception that ethics/morality has nothing to do with politics, the contrary is true. Politics, properly understood, feeds on moral ideals. Central to these are ideals such as freedom, equality and justice. Our laws tend to be more or less acceptable in proportion to the extent to which they further these moral ideals. Following this line of thinking, one has to conclude that morality, law, and politics are not three entirely separate domains. They overlap in diverse ways.

Politicians should make laws that help people in their society to flourish, that is, laws that promote the well-being of the people. In this regard, we can see that just as with morality, the key motivation behind law-making ought to be what helps people's lives and promotes harmony between them. For this reason, ideals such as achieving a just, free and equitable society are some of the most important considerations that motivate politicians. Even though in practice politicians do not always live up to these ideals, the fact that they consider them as they draw up their manifestos shows their importance. In fact, politicians proven to be corrupt, dishonest or generally immoral do not stand a good chance of success.

Following on from the fact that moral rules are, at least in part, aimed at regulating human conduct for the sake of the common good, some analogies can be made between morality and the law. In making this comparison it needs to be emphasised that even though morality and law do have some areas of similarity and overlap, the two are not the same. That is to say, breaking the law is generally wrong, but it is not always so. In fact there are instances when breaking the law can be morally right. The examples already cited above prove this point.

One similarity between morality and law is that both express commands that are meant to guide our actions and interactions with others. In other words, they consist of commands. For example, in many countries there is a law that makes stealing a crime. In this respect stealing from other people is a crime and it is also morally wrong. This shows that "some laws are simply moral rules formalized and backed up with the authority of the state."⁸ Behind such laws there is the authority of the state whose duty it is to enforce the law. Breaking the law can easily land one in jail. Behind the force of the law there are sanctions that the state imposes on those who break the law. Morality does not have such force behind it. Expressing the difference between morality and the law, Pojman states "law differs from morality in that there are physical sanctions enforcing the law, but only the sanctions of conscience and reputation enforcing morality."⁹ Breaking moral laws does not invite a fine or a prison term, as breaking the law does. Breaking moral rules will give one a bad name. It could lead to one being ostracised in society.

⁸K. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals...*, 62.

⁹L. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 3.

Supernaturalism

Another distinction that needs to be made is between religion and morality. Even though it is not possible to come up with a catch-all definition of religion, there are some general features that we can still say characterise religions. Amongst these is belief in a supreme order of value. In some religions there is a supreme being that is the source of this order of values. Religions provide moral instruction. As Shaw states, "Any religion provides its believers with a world view, part of which involves certain moral instructions, values, and commitments."¹⁰ Those who believe in God may take right and wrong to be determined by God's will. This is the essence of the divine command theory of morality.

In African traditional societies, it has been argued that ethical conduct was "realised by means of a relational network that is equally anthropocentric, cosmic and theocentric".¹¹ One had to take other human beings and the environment into account. The community of humans was seen as including the living, the dead and those yet to be born. Unlike in the Christian religion, where obedience to God is the paramount virtue, African religion does not take devotion to the deities as good in and of itself. This is because when deities fail to bring benefits to society, people feel free to sever relations with such deities.¹²

The point that we are interested in is that even if it is accepted that morality has a supernatural source, what exactly it demands still remains subject to different interpretations. Members of the same faith can differ in their interpretations of what the deities require of them.

A very important question that needs to be raised about attributing right and wrong to some supernatural source is whether that supernatural source commands certain things because they are right, or those things become right just because the supernatural being commands them. This is an ancient problem that Plato deals with in his dialogue *Euthyphro*. In the dialogue with Euthyphro, Socrates poses the question "*Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?*"¹³ The real issue is, "Just what is it that makes what the deities command good?" Faced with this kind of question it becomes clear that the necessity to carefully reflect on moral issues does not disappear once we invoke some supernatural authority.

¹⁰W. Shaw, ed., *Social and Personal Ethics*, 5th ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2005), 7

¹¹B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 20.

¹²J. A. I. Bewaji, "Ethics in Yoruba Culture," in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. K. Wiredu (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 399.

¹³Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961).

Ethical Relativism

People are born into families. Each family has its own rules for bringing up its young. As one grows up, one internalises the 'do's and 'don't's of one's family. When one grows older and starts relating to other people, one realises that some of the things that were forbidden in one's own family are allowed in other families. Examples of such things include drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, watching late night movies, attending parties and many other things. From this one realises that what might be right for one family may not be right for other families.

Despite the differences in families' sense of propriety, there still exist some general rules that members of the same society follow. For example, it is considered good manners for a young person to give up his/her seat on the bus to an elderly lady carrying a baby on her back. This is a matter of etiquette. Etiquette refers to matters of polite behaviour. It includes things like the proper attire for functions like parties, weddings and funerals. However, what is considered polite or appropriate behaviour in one place may be considered rude in another place.¹⁴ Pojman asserts that etiquette does not deal with matters that could bring about serious harm. It is a cultural invention and part of custom. In matters of etiquette it is appropriate to apply the old saying, 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do'.

However, as one looks across the different societies, it becomes clear that societies across the world also have different concepts of right and wrong. To highlight this point, Shaw¹⁵ gives the example of how the Irish and the Japanese regard abortion. Abortion is seen as immoral in Ireland whilst it is seen as morally permissible in Japan. In many African societies, cremating the dead is almost unthinkable, whilst in places like India this is normal practice.

Given the foregoing observations about the diversity of ethical values in different societies, one of the most fundamental questions is whether right and wrong are discovered or invented. According to Blocker,¹⁶ the most fundamental question in ethics is, "are there any universal, cross-cultural, normative standards for good and bad, right and wrong, and if so, what are they?" This particular question is especially important given the fact that the history of humanity is littered with instances of cultural imperialism. The Western world, in its self-appointed mission to spread civilization, tended to demonise everything that the local peoples across the world took as part of their moral systems.

In the light of the foregoing considerations, it becomes clear that one of the challenges that any credible moral theory must face is just how to come up with moral principles derived from a process of cross-cultural dialogue. In other words, how to come up with genuine, as opposed to imposed, universality.

¹⁴L. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 4.

¹⁵W. Shaw, ed., *Social and Personal Ethics*, 9.

¹⁶H. G. Blocker, *World Philosophy: An East-West Comparative Introduction to Philosophy* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1999), 159.

Faced with the fact of cultural and ethical diversity, the ethical relativist argues that right and wrong depend on what specific cultures say. For cultural relativism, what is right in one country or society may be wrong in another society. Using the example of cremating the dead, the ethical relativist will say that cremating the dead is moral in India whilst it is wrong in many African countries.

It cannot be denied that people from different parts of the world have different belief systems. They differ in their explanations of what there is in the world and they also differ in terms of what they believe about the good life for humans. History has experienced many occurrences of cultural imperialism. Under the guise of spreading universal moral values, the Western world imposed its own values on a great many peoples across the world. For this reason, the quest for universal moral values has been viewed with suspicion by those who were victims to this process. However, the question of whether there are any trans-cultural values is, according to Blocker, the most central question in moral philosophy.

We need some way, therefore, of working out how to separate benign from malign universalism: distinguishing between on the one hand, extending to all human beings the status one automatically grants one's own fellow citizens and, on the other, an arrogant imposition upon other cultures of one's own culture-specific beliefs; separating rational respect and concern from missionary fervour, moral superiority and patronising arrogance.¹⁷

The different moral theories we shall discuss here try to provide the basis for such values.

The Strengths of Relativism

Relativism promotes tolerance of difference. It states a sociological fact, namely, that different societies have different value systems. Recognizing this fact will enable us to appreciate differences and realize that our views could actually be wrong.

Relativism avoids cultural imperialism. Realizing that our values may be part of our own unique historical development, it will become unjustifiable to try and impose these values on others who may not share that history. In this way cultural imperialism can be avoided.

Relativism treats cultures as equal. This is because it maintains that there is no culture that is superior to another. For this reason, all peoples will be entitled to their own values.

These are just a few possible advantages that relativism has. This does not, however, mean that it is a plausible moral theory.

¹⁷R. Tallis, *Enemies of Hope: A critique of Contemporary Pessimism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 369.

Objections to Ethical Relativism

Faced with the reality of diversity, many people will be tempted to accept ethical relativism. This is partly because it is difficult to imagine that there could be a higher moral authority than one's own community.

Closer reflection will, however, cast doubt on the plausibility of ethical relativism as a moral theory. Many societies in the world are multicultural. They have people of different religious, political and moral convictions living within them. In light of this, what does cultural relativism amount to? Once it is accepted that even within one society diversity is more the norm than the exception, the real meaning of ethical relativism becomes difficult to understand.

Another reason why ethical relativism does not present an acceptable moral theory is that it makes it impossible to speak of moral progress. In some African societies, the birth of twins was regarded as an evil omen. For that reason one of the twins had to be killed. This is no longer the practice, thanks to the influence of the missionaries. If we take this as moral progress then we would have to reject relativism. This is due to the fact that, according to relativism, moral beliefs change but they do not improve or get worse. For relativism, whatever my society says is right is right. In this case, if the society says killing one of the twins is right, then it is right.

If ethical relativism is correct, then it means we have no right to criticise another culture. Some societies still practise arranged marriages, forcing young girls to marry old men. Racial discrimination is practised in some countries, as was the case in South Africa until 1994. Given that ethical relativism says right and wrong depend on what is accepted by given communities, we would have to say that all these practices are morally right as long as the said societies accept them. If we are not comfortable with this conclusion, we must reject ethical relativism as a moral theory.

Ethical relativism makes right and wrong a matter of numbers. If the majority thinks discriminating against a religious, racial or any other minority is acceptable, then it becomes right to do so. This makes people who champion moral reform wrong, until they manage to sway the opinion of the majority. Faced with these consequences of ethical relativism, it becomes clear that this is not a plausible moral theory. We need a moral theory that will help us to criticise things like slavery and forced marriages wherever they occur. For this to be possible, we need a moral theory that defines right and wrong independently of what particular communities say.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Who was Aristotle?

Aristotle was one of the greatest philosophers ever. Aristotle studied for twenty years (367-347) under Plato at Plato's Academy. He left the Academy when Plato died. His moral theory basically tries to mould noble people who do the right thing habitually, or because that is the kind of people they are. Moral education was the key to this.

Aristotle's Ethics

Aristotle begins by noting that every human activity aims at some good. For this reason he concludes that the good is that at which every activity, art, or inquiry aims.

However, he says that the ends are diverse. Some ends are desired as a means to something else. In that event, it is that something else that is more valuable. For example, health is the aim of medicine, a ship is the end of shipbuilding and a house is the end of architecture. The art of medicine is therefore valued as a means to good health and the same is true of the other arts. Having made this observation, Aristotle asks whether there is something that is desired for its own sake and towards which all the other activities aim.

If there is, then this would be the supreme good, and knowledge of this good is of great importance to the conduct of life. He says our aim is to understand this supreme good. Understanding what this good is, is instrumental in attaining it. In this case, ethics is devoted to the enquiry into the good life for humans. The salient point that must be emphasised here is that, for Aristotle, meta-ethics and ethics are not separated into stand-alone enquiries. Rather, they are part of the same enquiry. This is the way ethics should be taken.

Aristotle correctly notes that ethics does not admit of exact answers. For that reason we must be content with an answer that is less than absolutely certain, because this is the nature of the subject. Due to the diversity of things we call good, we must accept general rather than universal truths. An educated person will expect accuracy in each subject only so far as the nature of the subject allows. Having made these points, he argues that happiness is the good that we seek for its own sake. There is agreement that the supreme good is happiness, which is the same as living well or doing well. However, there is no agreement on what happiness is. The different concepts of happiness correspond to different types of life. He identifies the following types of life:

Sensual: The masses see life as something sensual—the life of emotional satisfaction.

Honour: In the political realm life is honour. Honour depends on what others say of us.

The Life of Thought: Contemplation or reflection giving rise to the wisdom to know why things are the way they are.

Aristotle sums this up by saying, “Men’s conception of the good or of happiness may be read in the lives they lead.... For there are, we may say three conspicuous types of life, the sensual, the political, and, thirdly the life of thought.”¹⁸

Features of the Good

We have noted that the good depends on the art or activity, such as medicine, strategy, etc; what is common to all is that it is the end that we aim at. Not all these are final ends. “We call absolutely final that which is always desired for itself and never as a means to something else.”¹⁹ Happiness is always desired for its own sake. The best way to define happiness is to consider the function for man.

¹⁸W. Shaw, ed., *Social and Personal Ethics*, 48.

¹⁹Shaw, *Social and Personal Ethics*, 48.

This idea is explained by making analogies with artefacts and arts. For example, the function of a knife is to cut. Hence a good knife is one that is sharp and can cut well. The function of a carpenter is to make furniture. Accordingly, the good carpenter is one who makes good furniture.

The function is that which defines a thing and sets it apart from other things. What then is the function of human beings? We cannot say 'life' because that is shared by plants. The life of sensation is shared by animals, so, that cannot be the function for humans.

The peculiar thing about humans is a life of reason. The function of humankind is, therefore, an activity of the soul in accordance with reason. Just as the function of a knife is to cut well, so the function of humans is to excel in the use of reason.

For Aristotle, "the good of man is activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, or, if there are more virtues than one, in accordance with the best and most complete virtue"²⁰ in a complete life. The qualification 'in a complete life' is necessary because a few happy episodes in one's life do not constitute a happy life. The happy person is the one who lives in accordance with perfect virtue and is adequately supplied with external goods.

Virtue, for Aristotle, is a mean between two extremes. That means the virtuous person must be able to steer a course between these two extremes. Examples of this are courage and generosity. At the extremes of courage there is cowardice at one end and foolhardiness at the other. For generosity, the extremes are extravagance and miserliness.

From this we can say that Aristotle tries to develop an ethics of character. That means that the morally good person must be able to do the right thing, not through a conscious effort to follow some laid-down principle, but out of habit. The good person performs moral acts because that is the kind of person she or he is. Virtue in this case will be something habitual and internalised. To achieve this, Aristotle thought that there was a need for good examples that could be emulated, but that there was also need for instruction.

African traditional ethics, as reflected in the idea of *ubuntu*, is closer to virtue ethics than to any of the moral theories discussed in this chapter. This is because each time one does wrong, the admonition from others is expressed in terms of one's lacking the quality that makes one a person. Samkange and Samkange²¹ express it as "*Hausi hunhu ihwo hwo*" in Shona, or in Ndebele, "*Kabusibo ubuntu lobo*." In English this can be translated as, "that is not the behaviour of a person or a human being." This suggests that a human being was expected to act in ways that express *ubuntu*, which in this case was something internalised. It needs to be noted here that this is just one possible reading of this rather ambiguous notion of *ubuntu*. One pos-

²⁰Shaw, *Social and Personal Ethics*, 48.

²¹S. Samkange & T. Samkange, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (Salisbury: Graham Publishing, 1980), 36.

sible objection to Aristotle's theory is that some emotions and actions are intrinsically bad, for example murder, theft, adultery.

Non-Consequentialism

Immanuel Kant is one of the most influential moral philosophers in the modern world. His Moral Philosophy was greatly influenced by his religious beliefs. Kant belonged to the Pietist sect of the Lutheran Church. This sect believed very strongly that the individual had the responsibility to achieve his own salvation. Kant's moral philosophy is based on the concept of duty. He believes that what makes actions right or wrong is whether or not they are performed for the sake of duty. The consequences do not make an action right or wrong.

For Kant, morality must be based on principles of reason, not from experience. This is because from experience we learn how people really act to meet their inclinations or desires. The point of morality is to direct us, to make us conform to the moral law against our inclinations. He puts it this way:

For us, whose choice is sensibly affected and so does not of itself conform to the pure will but often opposes it, moral laws are imperatives (commands or prohibitions) and indeed categorical (unconditional) imperatives. As such they are distinguished from technical imperatives (precepts of art) which always command only conditionally.²²

In view of this one can conclude that Kant's morality, like the Christian religion, tends to take a dim view of our inclinations. Right actions are those that are done in compliance with what he calls the pure will. This is because, for Kant, it is only this pure will that is unconditionally good. It is worthwhile to just briefly explain the difference between the two types of imperatives that Kant distinguishes in the above quotation. The first type of imperative is what he calls the categorical imperative. An imperative is a command. It tells us what we should do, not what is merely permitted. It says you ought to do this or you ought not to do that. The categorical imperative commands unconditionally. That means its force or application is not dependent on the desire to achieve certain outcomes. Once the action commanded presents itself to us we should be able to realise its obligatoriness and perform it because it is good in itself.

The categorical imperative is contrasted with the technical imperative. The technical imperative is conditional on the agent wanting to achieve certain results. This imperative is based precisely on the fact that we have inclinations or goals that we want to achieve. An example of such an imperative would be, if you want to avoid contracting HIV, abstain or use a condom. This imperative assumes that the agent wants to achieve a certain goal, in this case not contracting HIV. If someone does not care about contracting HIV, the imperative has no force on that person.

Another example would be, if you want to pass your course in philosophy, you must study hard and be able to think critically. Someone can say, "I do not care about

²²I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14.

getting good grades in philosophy,” in which case what the imperative commands will not apply to them.

The difference then between the categorical and hypothetical imperative is that one commands unconditionally whilst the other is absolute or unconditional. Kant believes that the categorical imperative is the imperative of morality. Whether this is the best way to think about morality, or not, has been debated. It is worth noting that some, like Philip Foot,²³ have argued that the hypothetical imperative is the one that underlies morality. Kant gave a number of formulations for his categorical imperative:

*Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law*²⁴

*Act as if the maxim of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law of nature*²⁵

*So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only.*²⁶

Kant seems to have believed that due to the fact that human beings are rational, they would eventually all arrive at the same conclusions regarding the moral law. This belief is, however, mistaken. Critiquing Kant on this point, Robert Norman argues that despite Kant's claim to base his ethics on the moral knowledge of human reason, the reality is that this is the ethics of Protestant Christianity. For this reason this ethics does not have the universality that Kant claims for it. He goes on to assert, “It is the ethical common sense of a particular society and a particular historical epoch”.²⁷ Attempts to prescribe this ethical system might lead to the malign universality that Tallis mentions above.

It is interesting to note that, to a large extent, Kant's categorical imperative is similar to the Christian golden rule which commands us to treat others as we would like them to treat us. This aspect of his moral thinking captures one of the central qualities of morality, that is, it must be universalisable. In other words, if something is right for me to do, it must also be right for anyone else in the same situation.

The idea of respect for persons that Kant expresses in the third formulation of his categorical imperative is also at the heart of *ubuntu*. In his explanation of *ubuntu*, Mogobe Ramose²⁸ states that the notion entails recognising and acknowledging the humanity of others and, on that basis, establishing humane relations with them. In traditional African society, failure to recognize the humanity of others or to establish

²³See P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

²⁴W. Shaw, ed., *Social and Personal Ethics*, 57.

²⁵W. Shaw, ed., *Social and Personal Ethics*, 58.

²⁶W. Shaw, ed., *Social and Personal Ethics*, 60.

²⁷R. Norman, *The Moral Philosophers: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 96.

²⁸M. B. Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999), 52.

humane relations with others would invite the comment, “this one is not a human being.” Being human, in this context, denotes something over and above the biological fact of being born a member of the species *homo sapiens*. It denotes the moral uprightness of the individual in question.

Samkange and Samkange make the same point about the meaning of *ubuntu*. They put the point thus,

The attention one human being gives to another: the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people; a code of behaviour, an attitude to other people and to life, is embodied in *hunhu* or *ubuntu*. *Hunhuism* is, therefore, something more than just humanness deriving from the fact that one is a human being.²⁹

Kant believes that morality expresses itself to us in the form of commands. For example, “do not commit adultery”. What is the source of these commands? They are founded on reason. If they come from an external source, obedience to them would be tantamount to following someone else’s will and this is contrary to our nature as rational and free beings. Such actions are described as heteronomous and not autonomous. Acting freely entails following our own will so, for Kant, the source of the moral law is internal to us as moral agents. The moral law is a law that the individual gives to her/himself.

For Kant, then, to judge whether an act is moral or not we must focus on the intention of the moral agent. If the intention is right, the action is right regardless of the results. This idea has its root in the Protestant belief in the priority of faith over works. The appeal of this argument is that there are many instances where we recognise that even though the consequences might be bad, the moral agent is not to blame. If, for instance, I stop by the roadside intending to help an accident victim but in the end the person dies because I might have overlooked one or two things, should I be blamed for it?

Another very appealing component of Kant’s ethics is the idea of respect for persons expressed in the categorical imperative. This is because it prohibits us from using other people to meet our own ends, totally disregarding their interests in the process. It is a rule against the exploitation of one human being by another.

Objections to Kant’s Theory

The most damning objection to Kant’s moral theory is that it seems to be made for angels and not human beings. In other words, it is not really practicable. This is because, in the real world, people always think about the consequences of their actions. Simply following rules for the sake of following them makes us slaves to those rules. This is unacceptable because rules should serve human interests and well-being. Following rules even when they do not do this could mean sacrificing human interests for the sake of conformity to the rules. For this reason, the ethical system becomes too rigid.

²⁹Samkange & Samkange, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism*..., 39.

Another weakness in Kant's theory is that the categorical imperative is just a formal requirement of moral rules. There is no reason to assume, as Kant seems to have done, that all rational beings would arrive at the same conclusion. For example, if we look at abortion, both those who support and those who oppose it could very well satisfy the demands of the imperative. For this reason we can see that in concrete life situations, where the moral agent has to make choices, the categorical imperative will not be helpful.

After these few observations let us move on to look at alternative types of moral theory.

Consequentialist Theories

Consequentialism is the view that says that the decision as to whether an act is right or wrong depends on the consequences of the act. If it produces more good than bad it is right. Actions have consequences for many people, so who should be included in our moral calculus? There are two main responses to this question, the egoist and the utilitarian response. We shall start with egoism.

Egoism

When we say someone is an egoist we mean that person acts from self-interest. In general, the egoist puts his/her interests before those of everyone else. To the question, "consequences for whom?" the egoist says, "those of the moral agent". Egoism says an act is morally right if, and only if, it promotes the moral agent's interests in the long term.

Sacrifices are sometimes necessary for one's good in the long term. For example, a student may sacrifice joy, sleep, money etc. to secure good grades. These grades will be a possible stepping-stone to a bright future. This shows that the egoist can explain acts that may not appear to be in the interest of the moral agent.

Egoists are not necessarily hedonists. That is, they do not necessarily believe that only pleasure is good in itself. Epicurus, an ancient Greek philosopher (341-270 B.C.E), was an egoist. To be called an Epicurean is to be labelled someone who seeks pleasure. There are different forms of egoism.

The first type of egoism is *psychological egoism*. The claim of psychological egoism is that people always act to promote their own self-interest. For this reason, altruism is impossible. Psychological egoism is not, strictly speaking, a moral theory. Rather, it is a psychological theory about human nature. What is important to note in this regard is that it brings to the fore the fact that our views about morality are, to a considerable extent, influenced by our conception of human nature. If we think that human beings are essentially selfish then it may be asking too much of them to perform altruistic actions.

The other type of egoism is *ethical egoism*. This is the theory that says everyone ought to act in his or her own self-interest. This theory has been defended on a number of grounds. The first, and perhaps the most interesting argument for it, is that by acting this way the common good is thereby achieved. Libertarian philosophers believe that

the best way to promote the common good is to let everyone pursue their own interest. The key here is liberty. Trying to actively and consciously plan for the common good is seen as coercive. The egoist maintains that each person knows best what they want and they are the most qualified to determine how best to achieve their goals. Anything else is not just futile, but worse still, an infringement of people's liberty. For this reason everyone ought to pursue his or her own self-interest.

Problems of Egoism

Psychological Egoism is not a sound theory of human nature. This is because there are just as many examples of selflessness as there are acts of self-interest – think about the philanthropic acts of people like Jairos Jiri in Zimbabwe, or Mother Theresa of Calcutta. These are individuals who spent their lives serving the interests of others. Whilst self-interest plays a big part in our actions it is not the only influence. We also have benevolence as part of our nature. Suppose you see a child drowning in a shallow pond of dirty water as you walk to class. Most of us would rescue the child without any thought of what we are going to get from the action. The egoist will say we do it for self-interest – maybe we wanted to be praised or to feel good about ourselves.

At the end the theory can explain everything, which makes it irrefutable. One of the issues to be considered is how widely self-interest is defined. Some, like Gene Blocker³⁰ state that egoism is more a challenge to moral philosophy than a contribution to it.

The point of morality is to restrain our self-interest, passions and desires. People's desires and interests often conflict and this theory cannot provide a basis on which to resolve them. This is because it encourages each person to simply promote his or her own interests. It cannot provide a basis for cooperation.

Utilitarianism

The most powerful consequentialist moral theory is utilitarianism. By and large, when consequentialism is discussed, one form or other of utilitarianism is what people have in mind. Utilitarianism is not only powerful as a consequentialist theory. When John Rawls wrote his *A Theory of Justice*³¹ he explicitly stated that one of his main aims was to provide an alternative to utilitarianism, which had become the dominant moral theory. I will just provide the basic features of this theory.

Utilitarianism was developed by thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and, most importantly, by John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). The key element of this theory is its focus on happiness and the avoidance of pain. According to utilitarianism, our actions, policies and laws are to be judged on the basis of their ability or likelihood to produce more general good than pain. An action is good if it produces more happiness than pain for the greatest number of people. Its focus on the greatest number of people is where it differs from egoism. Utilitarians believe that our actions are goal-oriented. That makes

³⁰H. G. Blocker, *World Philosophy: An East-West Comparative Introduction to Philosophy* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), 160.

³¹See J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971.

them teleological. Because of this they argue that our rules and law must be judged by reference to the goal at which we aim. That goal is identified as the attainment of happiness and the avoidance of pain. A statement of the utilitarian theory is given by J.S Mill when he asserts,

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals utility, or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness, is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.³²

What is appealing about utilitarianism is that, unlike egoism, it takes the welfare of other people seriously. In fact one of the principles of utilitarianism is that the happiness of all should count *equally*. Mill argues that,

As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.³³

He goes on to argue that, "In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility".³⁴ It is noteworthy that in our discussion of Kant's categorical imperative, a similar comparison was made with the same golden rule. This suggests that the Christian golden rule captures something that is fundamental to any credible moral theory.

Whilst Kant's moral theory takes obedience to the moral rule as the sole criterion for deciding right and wrong, utilitarianism also takes the consequences seriously. It demands that people do not just follow rules for the sake of following them. Rather, rules must be followed if doing so leads to the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

By good, or happiness, utilitarianism means different things. The hedonistic version proposed by Bentham takes 'pleasure' as the end of our actions. However, Mill seems to have taken a more Aristotelian understanding of happiness as that which is in accordance with reason.

Two components of utilitarianism are worth distinguishing. These are *Welfarism* and *Consequentialism*.³⁵ Welfarism denotes a method through which we are to evaluate states of affairs and policies. Its basic claim is that policies are correct or right if they lead to the greatest possible improvement to people's welfare, and to the satisfaction of their needs and ambitions. In this regard it becomes clear that utilitarianism is a moral theory that can guide policy and other public processes. Law-making is, as we

³²J. Bentham and J. S. Mill, eds. *The Utilitarians. An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. New York: Anchor Books, 1973, 404.

³³Mill, 1973: 418.

³⁴Mill, 1973: 418.

³⁵A. Sen & B. Williams, *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 3.

noted above, the job of politicians, but in that process moral considerations also play a salient role.

The other component of utilitarianism is consequentialism. This component is meant to guide our actions. Which action we should choose must depend on the consequences. Sen and Williams sum up the utilitarian concept of right and wrong as follows:

Utilitarianism, in its central forms, recommends a choice of actions on the basis of consequences, and consequences in terms of welfare. Utilitarianism is thus a species of welfarist consequentialism—that particular form of it which requires simply adding up individual welfares or utilities to assess the consequences, a property that is sometimes called sum ranking.³⁶

Utilitarianism as a moral theory acknowledges that many of our actions have good as well as bad consequences. The correct action weighs these and adopts the one that maximizes happiness. The agent's happiness is taken to be on a par with that of everyone else; the greatest happiness for the greatest number depends on context. For this reason the utilitarian will say that, in some circumstances, lying can be the right thing to do.

Objections to Utilitarianism

One of the criticisms of utilitarianism is that it sacrifices the individual for the sake of the greater good. Imagine that your mother is trapped in one of two buildings that are on fire. The other building has more people, amongst whom there is a very outstanding young doctor. You only have time to rescue people in one of the buildings. Which of the two groups of people are you going to save? If your answer is the people in the same house as your mother, the utilitarian will say this is wrong because this is not the action that creates the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. In this case, the special bond between you and your mother is sacrificed for the greatest happiness for the greatest number. For this reason critics of utilitarianism argue that the theory can be too demanding.

Another objection to utilitarianism is that it can justify the violation of human rights, or that it does not give them the priority they deserve. Utilitarianism takes human rights and justice as subject to the production of happiness. Imagine that a member of a hated minority group is suspected of having raped a ten year old girl. The police take this man in for questioning. As they proceed with their investigation they discover that the man is innocent. However, the community is up in arms and want the man severely punished or even executed. There is a real danger of rioting if the man is not punished. Releasing him is likely to result in his being killed by the mob. What should the police do? In such cases, critics of utilitarianism claim, the theory will say that the man must be punished. For this reason it can lead to injustice.

³⁶A. Sen & B. Williams, *Utilitarianism*...., 4.

The final criticism we shall consider is that utilitarianism is an aggregative theory. In other words it wants to maximize the amount of happiness. By so doing it does not appear to be concerned about how the happiness is distributed. Sometimes it is more important to focus on the distributive patterns than the total amount of happiness. Adding one million dollars to Oprah Winfrey's earnings is not going to produce as much happiness as giving one hundred dollars to a destitute family. For this reason we should also be concerned about this aspect. Aggregative theories, that is to say theories that focus on maximizing total utility without due attention to who gets what, are not always morally acceptable.

Conclusion

Morality is not identical with the law. Neither is it simply following the dictates of some supernatural beings. It requires that we use our reason to reflect on what is right and wrong. The moral theories discussed here give a good idea of what a credible moral theory is supposed to be like. However, there is disagreement amongst moral philosophers as to which of these theories is correct. It must be made clear that, despite some significant differences between Kantian ethics and utilitarianism, there are some areas of commonality between them. The two theories' reference to the Christian golden rule helps to prove this point. Aristotle's ethics is an ethics of character; it requires that we aim at instilling the virtues so that people act rightly from habit. This is comparable to the Bantu concept of *ubuntu*. However this should not be taken to imply that the two are identical; rather, it should be taken as pointing to the fact that even though moralities differ across time and space, there are areas of convergence or similarity between them. For this reason, the search for universal values is not a hopeless endeavour.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Applied Ethics

Joseph B. R. Gaie

Introduction

In this Chapter, we shall first define philosophy and show how ethics generally relates to philosophy. Thereafter, we shall then give a specific working definition of applied ethics. This is because a good grasp of what philosophy is will enable the reader to easily understand ethics generally and applied ethics in particular. For example, when defining biochemistry as a science, we start by defining science. This leads us to the definition of biology, chemistry then lastly biochemistry.

The Chapter will further argue that in the Setswana tradition, there is no distinction between theory and practice. From this discourse, it becomes evident that ethics permeates the whole of human life. Finally, the chapter discusses the relevance of applied ethics in HIV/Aids, business, politics, and sports, among other disciplines.

The Meaning of Philosophy

Descartes argues that “the sciences taken all together are identical with human wisdom, which always remains one and the same, however applied to different subjects...”¹ Therefore, because ethics is also called “moral philosophy” we need to understand the meaning of “philosophy” in analysing “moral philosophy.”

The word “Philosophy” comes from two Greek words “philos” meaning friend (“phileo” I love) and “sophos” meaning a wise person (“sophia” wisdom). A “philos Sophia” means a friend of wisdom while a “phileo sophos” means one who loves a wise person. Therefore, philosophy is the study of wisdom. In our context, we know what to study means. Therefore, we shall go ahead and examine what wisdom entails. Wisdom is a way of looking at reality. It is also a way of dealing with reality and being conscious of it and being aware of that consciousness.

Branches of Philosophy

There are different branches of philosophy. These include metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and logic. Therefore, philosophy deals with metaphysical, epistemological, ethical

¹D. Kolak, *Lovers of Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy with Integrated Readings*, London: Wadsworth, 2001: 235.

and logical questions. Below are some of the philosophical questions in the context of the relevant branch of philosophy.

Metaphysics – ‘What is there in existence? What does it mean to say that something exists? What does it mean to say that a thing is itself? What is being and non-being? What is real or unreal? Is there a God? Are there material and non-material realities? Are things what they appear to be? Am I a butterfly that is dreaming of being a human being?’ When we ask if there is reality we are in the area called *metaphysics*. If we ask whether there is beauty, we are in the area of aesthetics.

Epistemology – ‘How do I know? Do people know? What, if anything, do people know? How do they know if they do?’ If we ask whether beauty is knowable, we are discussing *epistemology*. If we inquire if it is objective or what it means, we are branching off to *aesthetics*.

Ethics – ‘Is there a measure by which human beings can determine the moral wrongness or rightness of their actions? Are there intrinsically good or evil things? Are there any basic principles of morality? If so, what are they? What is the status of moral statements? Are moral statements meant to reveal truth? What is the relationship between behaviour and moral awareness? Are there different ethics or moralities for different societies and professions?’

Finally, questions in logic include: Is there a proper way of reasoning? If so, what is it? How is it determined and by who?

We have to note here that we can ask all these questions in different languages. Greece has just contributed a label of the study that we call philosophy.

Philosophy and Batswana

Philosophy itself cannot be said to have originated from Greece as some philosophers might want us to believe.² For example, when a Motswana says that “*monna ga a betwe o kgomothwa fela*” (there is no need to be diligent and artistic in creating a man) he or she is engaging in aesthetics. The statement further means that however ugly, a man is man enough if it performs the functions of a man. A man does not need to be handsome.

We can say with confidence that Batswana learned this neither from the Greeks nor from the British. They have always known this since they spoke their language. When they say *motho ga a itsiwe e se naga* (unlike land or country it is difficult to know a person) they are talking both metaphysics and epistemology. When they say *o se bone tholana borethe teng ga yone go a baba* (inspite of its smoothness a wild berry is bitter). They are talking logic; and when they say *thong botho* (the ability to be ashamed makes one a good person) they are talking ethics. However, that debate is not within the scope of this Chapter. The Batswana examples are given just to discount the view that philosophy originated from Greece. But we still have not defined what a wise person is or what the study of wisdom involves.

²J. A. I. Bewaji, *Beauty and Culture: Perspectives in Black Aesthetics*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books: 29, 30ff.

Benchmarks of Philosophical Argumentation

As the study of wisdom, philosophy differs from other ways of looking at fundamental questions by its critical, generally systematic approach and its dependence on rational argument. It is analytical, clear, critical, comprehensive, coherent, consistent, logical, objective, rational, synthetic and honest. It is not just the love of wisdom but also “the process of asking questions (or as the process of developing the sense of inquisitiveness and inquiry by members of society.”³ A more elaborate explanation of these terms will help us. Philosophy is about asking questions relating to ultimate reality and meaning and pushing the questions to the maximum limit. Philosophy approaches fundamental questions in a generally systematic manner compared to mysticism or the arts. These approaches are discussed below.

Analysis

In philosophy there is need for analysis. This means breaking down issues into manageable parts, relating, understanding and clarifying them. For example, an argument in a write-up can be broken down into: argument, reasons, assumptions (stated or not-stated), analogies, principles, concepts and conclusion. This analysis helps us to understand the issues that are being discussed.

For instance, analysing the following statement helps us to determine that it is tautologous: Joe’s twin brother is his male sibling who was born at the same time with him. The subject: *Joe’s twin brother* contains the second part of the statement: *his male sibling who was born at the same time with him*. We are then able to determine whether or not the speaker of these words has said anything new.

Coherence

Coherence is when different parts of the discourse or argument fit together. It means, sensible discourse not one with contradictory or incompatible parts. The philosopher is interested in whether or not ideas and beliefs coexist, are related, complete each other, or form a structure. He or she wants to know whether ideas interrelate and form a structure that is complete.

This involves reconciling interpretations and resolving *prima facie* contradictions. For example, if somebody argued that life ought to be protected at all costs, it would be incoherent for the same person to argue that a murderer ought to be executed. Such arguments would not make sense. Coherence means all the elements or parts of an argument come together systematically to give a complete discourse.

Clarity

This means non-obscure discourse. The philosopher wants to know “What do you mean?” Clarity means avoidance of ambiguity. It means saying what one means. For example, in a case where one is said to have forgotten something, the philosopher would ask what “forgetting” means. Does it mean that one does not know anymore?

³Bewaji, *Beauty and Culture*....: 25.

Is forgetfulness loss of knowledge? Or if we say that X is related to Y, we may want to know the exact type of relationship. We may ask: 'What is a relationship? What does it mean to claim there is a relationship? Does that reflect a reality that can be observed by others? These among many other questions help in clarifying fundamental questions.

Comprehensive

This means looking at things in a holistic manner. We consider all the relevant factors, that is – seeing the bigger picture. For example, in the case of a book; examine the paper used, size, colour weight, author and other features. In an argument, we examine all the relevant facts and evidence before coming up with a conclusion. In this context we can easily say that the study of philosophy is an examination of the whole of reality. Nothing is left out. There is nothing that cannot or does not raise a philosophical question. Philosophy is attempting to answer all the questions holistically, in total, not partially.

Consistency

This means uniform, persistent, unchanging application of similar issues in similar ways and circumstances. Somebody is consistent when they do not contradict themselves and when they present an argument that flows. This should run from the first principles to complex ideas derived from the principles. As noted earlier, we cannot claim to hold the view that all human life is sacred and has to be preserved always, yet execute murderers. That is inconsistency – hence the need for exceptions in such arguments. Otherwise if all life is sacred, then the murderer's life is sacred too and ought to be preserved.

Critical

This means ruthless questioning of assumptions, beliefs and arguments. Not credulous trusting in tradition, authority and other assumptions. It further refers to being non-presumptuous, unassuming and challenging the beliefs and assumptions normally taken for granted. It involves being generally open to challenges as well. In critiquing, there is nothing obvious. Any position stakes its primacy on the basis of reason. Being critical is not just differing with any position that is advanced. It also involves appreciating the appropriateness, correctness and reasonability of any given theory or position. It is an appraisal processes that requires serious assessment and evaluation.

Objectivity

Something is objective when it is verifiable, non-subjective, non-emotional and professional. It is also public in the sense that everybody who is objective is able to come to the same conclusion after examining the facts. Also, objectivity means that the being or existence of something, or its truth does not depend on an individual or individuals. It is out there for anyone to discover and access once they have the proper tools.

We can say that wisdom is an objective reality in that every rational being is capable of attaining it. This is a truism which does not depend on who I am; neither does it depend on anybody. Anybody who understands the English language; or any other language for that matter and is objective, will understand and discover this truth.

Honesty

An honest enquiry is truthful. It does not let emotion cloud truth. It is a disinterested inquiry that does not seek to sacrifice truth on the platter of personal preference. To demonstrate this, for example, Christians would like to believe that their religion is consistent and reasonable. However, an honest inquiry into the problems raised by this belief in an omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent God will probably reveal that there is no easy answer. This is because the same God is supposed to punish people eternally in hell if they misbehave and die without repentance. In addition, a Christian who studies the church history must be honest to accept that it is replete with ungodly acts. These include evidence of the church abusing children, getting involved in slavery, taking the side of the unjust and oppressing the poor. If such a study is honest, it will not present the church history as a mark of “clean” missionary activity.

Logical

Logic is used in explaining, developing premises and drawing valid conclusions. It also means use of valid and sound argumentation. For example, ‘John is my brother. Therefore I am John’s brother.’ This helps to avoid fallacious arguments. Three instances are given as examples below: First, ‘he is HIV positive – meaning he cheated on his wife. Therefore, he is an evil man.’ Second is the *ad hominem*, e.g. ‘He is a cruel man. Therefore, he is never going to tell the truth. So, I do not believe him now and I will never do.’ Third, ‘the world champion approves of this product. Therefore, it must be good,’ or ‘many people like this. So, it must be good quality.’

Practical

Does the issue have relevance to everyday life? Philosophy tries to address issues that have relevance to society in their everyday life. It is a ‘cradle-to-the-grave’ kind of enterprise. There is no subject under the sun that is not open to philosophical investigation; no action that a philosopher may not raise questions about. That is why it is argued that for some people, if philosophers were kings, or kings were philosophers, the world would be better.⁴

Rational

Does the person use reason without appealing to emotions and beliefs? Reason is one of the defining characteristics of human beings. That is why they are defined as rational animals. Many people, just like philosophers do may raise questions about what being reasonable, using reason or being rational is. However, they are all in agreement that

⁴J. A. Price, *Philosophy Through the Ages*, London: Wadsworth, 2000: 64ff.

human beings can reason. It is through reasoning that they get the best out of life and out of themselves as individuals as well as society and communities. In fact the whole of human history is humanity's attempt to make sense of reality and how best to benefit from the reality.

Synthetic

This means bringing issues together so as to have a unified and complete argument. It is a reconciliation of divergent views or theories. For example, psychology and philosophy can be brought together to answer certain questions. For instance, if according to psychology a child normally reaches moral maturity at age nine, any moral view should consider this—blameworthiness or praise would depend on the age of the agent. Here we would synthesise the theories or arguments in psychology and relate them to ethics thereby coming up with a more informed and clearer view.

Systematic

Systematisation is the grouping or classifying of data in such a way that they will appear in manageable blocks of ideas. This means the reflection on reality is made systematically, not haphazardly. Thereafter, one can recognise rhythmic, coherent and supplementary as well as complementary relationships between issues in addition to the way they may not be related.

Theoretical

This deals with theories and abstract, speculative ideas. Philosophers come up with what they think is the state of affairs and their reasons for that. Some other philosophers reflect on these and counter, modify, expand before embracing them. For example, thinkers come up with what they think makes things right or wrong. That is, they theorise about issues.

Meaning of Ethics

We have seen that philosophy is divided into four major subsets or branches: metaphysics, logic, epistemology and ethics. Therefore ethics, as noted earlier is a branch of philosophy. A. R. Lacey points out in his preface to "A Dictionary of Philosophy" that many entries would be in the areas of logic and epistemology rather than aesthetics, ethics and politics because the former are central to philosophy. He notes that "terms and concepts from them are constantly used in discussing the latter subjects, while the contrary occurs rarely, if at all."⁵

⁵A. R. Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1996, p.v.

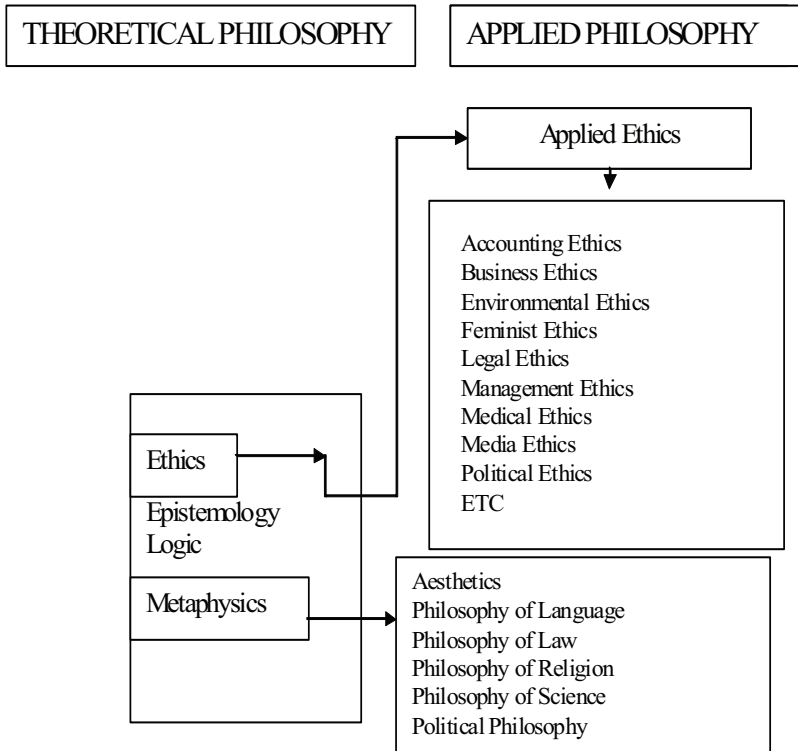


Figure 25.1: Major Branches of Philosophy.

The major branches of philosophy provide a theoretical basis for ethics. Therefore, we will also discuss their relationship with ethics. Figure 25.1 shows the major branches of philosophy alongside some of the applied areas of philosophy. Ethics falls under the study of wisdom. But, it is not just the study of wisdom in general. It is the study of wisdom in ethical issues.

In Setswana, the word wisdom can be translated as *botlhale*. Batswana distinguish between being a cunning person and being wise. *Go tlhalefela kwa thoko*, literally meaning “to be clever in the periphery” is not the same as being wise as such. *Botlhale* in the above sense means being aware of and practising or behaving according to reason in *botho*.⁶ That is, being what a person is—*motho*.

⁶This idea has been discussed by Mmolai and Gaie.

The terms ‘moral’ and ‘ethics’ come from the Latin and Greek words *mores* and *ethos*, respectively, deriving their meaning from the idea of custom.⁷ The terms refer to customs, cultural laws and values.⁸ Culture determines what is right and wrong. It is the culture that establishes customs as well as laws and norms. Values derived from culture determine traditions. The ethics philosopher, also known as moral philosopher, investigates among other things, the nature, origin, type and extent of right and wrong. If ‘moral’ means customs, cultural laws and values, then moral philosophy would be philosophy of those customs, cultural laws and values.

In simple terms, ethics is the study of varieties of right and wrong. It is the theory or study of the good and bad, wrong and right. It asks whether or not there are varieties of goodness or badness. For example, is a good lecturer necessarily a good person? It is the study of moral goodness. It is the study of customs, cultural laws and values.

Therefore, moral philosophy as a branch of philosophy is an analytical, clear, critical, comprehensive, coherent, consistent, logical, objective, rational, synthetic, practical, systematic and theoretical and honest study of moral goodness. It is the wisdom about customs, cultural laws and values—asking ultimate questions about them. It is about discovering moral principles and questioning how they are applied or applicable to situations. It is even questioning if there are any valid moral principles.

Theoretical ethics is the science of theorising about ethics—coming up with theories of good and evil; moral excellence and obligation. The science attempts to answer among other questions, what is the good life? How do people ought to live? Does human nature presuppose morality?

Questions about the validity of moral principles are usually in the area called metaethics. Here, the questions asked are for example, how do we determine the validity of an ethical theory? How do we tell whether some proposition is an ethical theory or not? What is a moral right and how, where, when does it originate? Does it make sense to derive an *ought* from what *is*?⁹

Ethics and Other Branches of Philosophy

The relationship between ethics and other branches of philosophy helps people to understand ethics generally and applied ethics in particular. The major areas for our purposes are metaphysics, logic and epistemology.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the study of being or existence. It asks questions about the being of numbers, universals, particulars, minds and non-materiality among other things.¹⁰ This is relevant to ethics in the sense that the latter assumes metaphysics. For example, in the case of Batswana humanbeinghood (metaphysics) determines morality. It is also

⁷L. P. Pojman, *Philosophy*, London: Wadsworth, 1999: 366.

⁸Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy...*: 221.

⁹M. Boylen, *Basic Ethics*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 6; J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, London: Penguin Books, 1977: 64ff.

¹⁰Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy...*: 205ff.

true that the nature of human beings (metaphysics) determines what should happen to them. This comes out clearly in the case of abortion where some philosophers argue that a foetus is not a person, hence it can be killed.

Some ethical questions are metaphysical in nature. For example, the idea of freedom of will determines the ability to be morally responsible or to be a moral being. The idea of following one's conscience as a moral action derives directly from the metaphysical supposition that the nature of a human being is such that it will have this faculty.

Among other subjects studied in metaphysics in the areas of philosophy of language as well as epistemology is the idea of fact. Do facts exist? What are they? What does it mean to say something is a fact? This is related to ethics in the sense that if facts exist, can we say there are ethical facts? What would that mean? Would it mean the same thing as talking about empirical facts? Are these ethical facts objective? Raising the same question of value objectivity J.L. Mackie says:

Even more important, however, and certainly more generally applicable, is the argument from queerness. This has two parts, one metaphysical, the other epistemological. If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.¹¹

Logic

Logic is the study of correct reasoning. It also deals with the way this correct or valid reasoning is systematised. It asks questions about deductions and implications. It deals with the identification and use of premises, conclusions and relations between things and ideas. This is clearly related to ethics because moral arguments, theories and terms can be related or may be related in a way that logic would demand an explanation.

The moral philosopher does not only have to reason logically. Moral terms and concepts raise logical questions. That is to say, the terms and concepts make certain logical assumptions that may or may not be valid. For example, "*Deontic logic* studies logical relations between propositions containing terms like 'obliged', 'commanded', 'permitted' and 'forbidden' though the term tends to be confined to the construction of formal systems using deontic terms, and the problems these systems raise."¹²

Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of knowledge,¹³ whether we have it and what it is. It studies how if we do get knowledge, how we know that we have it and how knowledge is related to belief and truth.

¹¹Mackie, *Ethics*....: 38.

¹²Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*...: 182.

¹³K. Lehrer, *Theory of Knowledge* (2nd ed.), (Boulder Colorado & Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), 1.

Epistemology is also called *Theory of Knowledge* and sometimes *gnoseology*.¹⁴ It is related to ethics in at least two important ways. First, epistemology is usually assumed whenever we engage in discourse generally as well as when we discuss ethics. For example, we assume that we mean something by the marks that we make on the paper. As we type the letters and form sentences, people are able to read and understand what we are saying. Here the assumption is that knowledge and communication is possible.

The second relation assumes that since ethics is the study of right and wrong, moral agency is premised on the possibility of knowing that certain things are or can be wrong. It is also based on the assumption that a particular action that an agent is about to engage in or has carried out is either right or wrong. For example, a thief has to know that the act of stealing is wrong for him to be held morally responsible for his thieving. Young children are normally not held responsible for their behaviour on the understanding that they do not have knowledge. In other words, ignorance is an extenuating circumstance for moral responsibility. This assumption is normally made in cases of applied ethics as it will be clear below.

Moral epistemology as argued by J. L. Mackie, deals with the *knowability* or otherwise, objectivity or subjectivity of value.¹⁵

A connected question is whether there are any objective moral truths (as moral realism holds), and whether moral conclusions can be objective even if not strictly describable as 'true'. Questions about how such conclusions might be known; and, in general about how moral arguments can be justified; what part is played in them by reason, feeling and intuition; about the nature and role of conscience, belong to MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY. An important notion in this area is that of UNIVERSALIZABILITY and the MORAL sphere can often be compared with others like the aesthetic or that of rational action in general.¹⁶

We note here that moral epistemology is just the confluence or intersection between epistemology and ethics or moral philosophy. This means the questions raised have relevance for both epistemology and ethics. Robert Audi directly engages in this subject when he sees a connection between rational desire and altruism.¹⁷

Meaning of Applied Ethics

Applied Ethics is the use of ethical or moral theories to address specific moral issues.¹⁸ It is a branch of philosophy in the applied area as evident from Figure 25.1. It is also a branch of ethics. Michael Boylan explains that:

¹⁴Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*....: 90ff.

¹⁵Mackie, *Ethics*....: 38.

¹⁶Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*....: 97.

¹⁷R. Audi, *The Structure of Justification*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 448ff.

¹⁸J. C. Callahan, (ed.), *Ethical Issues in Professional Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988: 7-8.

Applied ethics concerns itself with solving particular moral problems. Obviously, this process is greatly dependent on the theories one adopts (normative ethics). Applied ethics is thus concerned with making actual ethical decisions. It is related to decision theory in which a normative ethical theory is included in the decision-making rubric.¹⁹

He further explains that:

Applied ethics assumes a theory of normative ethics and a linking principle or principles by which the ethical principles or maxims can be applied in real life situations. It is a very difficult branch of ethics because it assumes a certain facility with the subject matter of ethics and with the general practical imperatives involved.²⁰

What Michael Boylan calls 'normative ethics' is actually the content of ethics.²¹ Normative ethics is actually the norms or principles of ethics. It is the part of ethics that tries to understand what principles are there and how or if they are justified. For example, the assumption that any one of utilitarianism, egoism or Kantianism are justified means that the moral philosopher will apply it in determining the moral rightness or wrongness of a particular action or some kind of behaviour. Capital punishment can be shown to be not only morally acceptable but also morally required if one is a Kantian. Even though, some Kantians can argue that the moral principles that Immanuel Kant espouses do not necessarily lead to the requirement of capital punishment.²²

So we can say applied ethics is philosophising about how certain actions are morally right or morally wrong. It is the practical part of the speculative discipline that is called philosophy and ethics. According to Kant,

We have to distinguish between pure ethics or the metaphysics of morals, which deals with the supreme principle or principles of morality and with the nature of moral obligation as such, and applied ethics, which applies the supreme principle or principles to the conditions of human nature.²³

If theories of moral right and wrong or theories about moral right make sense, they are testable and tested in applied ethics. As evident from Figure 25.1, applied ethics has many branches. There is what is called 'professional ethics', which deals with the ethical issues in professions such as medicine, law, nursing and teaching. Then there are other areas such as environmental ethics, biomedical ethics and feminist ethics.

¹⁹Boylan, *Basic Ethics*.....: 16.

²⁰M. Boylen, *Business Ethics*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001: 1.

²¹See for Example, J.L. Mackie (1977:104).

²²See J. B. R. Gaie, "The relevance of Plato's Ethical View to Political developments in Southern Africa" paper presented at the Annual Philosophical Society of Southern Africa Conference, Durban, South Africa, 2001.

²³F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy Volume 6 Modern Philosophy Part II Kant*, New York: Image Books, 1964: 104.

Applied ethics also deals with moral issues that arise in society, the main question being whether or not it is morally justified to do certain things. For example, the question of economic empowerment raises moral problems such as do people need to be empowered? Who should be empowered and on what basis? What is the theoretical basis of such empowerment actions? Botswana did not have women soldiers for same time. Some people argued that it was not morally right to maintain the *status quo* because it amounted to discrimination of women (Nleya and Gaie). However, others suggested that it was not right to enlist women into the army.²⁴

So far there seems to be a clear distinction between philosophical and theoretical ethics on the one hand and applied ethics on the other. In the Setswana tradition however, there is no distinction between theory and practice. It is accurate to say that is what the African tradition holds in general. One would venture to suggest that riddles, proverbs and sayings in these traditions are some kind of theorising that we can learn a lot from. Theorising is also part of what modern African scholars have to do to their traditions so that they can compete in the world of ideas. The suggestion here is that an examination of the Setswana tradition will show a different form of applied ethics.

Applied Ethics in Setswana

In Setswana, the definition of a person includes the idea of ethics. This is consistent with what Batswana generally believe. In Setswana *botho* (humanbeinghood) is morality itself. Mmolai and Gaie have argued that:

It is important to emphasise from the outset that the concept of *botho* is morality itself. In Setswana, *botho* is simply humanbeinghood or the essence of being a human person. It is that which separates people or human beings from any other animal species. At a metaphysical level there is a thing that has the essence of *botho* (humanbeinghood).²⁵

Rantao (quoted in Mmolai and Gaie) has also shown that when Batswana say a person is immoral they use the word *botho*, that is, the person has no *botho*, meaning humanbeinghood. Tlotlo Matshediso²⁶ quoting a Guta-RaMwari preacher Peter Hikwa states that “the church has the ability to build people morally and in encouraging people to be proud of what they are, which is in line with the national vision.” The context is that the National Vision 2016 of Botswana has adopted development with *botho* as the most morally acceptable developmental paradigm. This actually means being human is being moral. This position is consistent with the English language speakers when they say that people should be treated “humanely” or it is inhuman to

²⁴See Menyatso, 2006

²⁵S. Mmolai & J. Gaie, “The concept of botho and efforts to combat HIV/AIDS: Opportunity or challenge? Paper presented at the 6th Biennial National Council on Teacher Education Conference, Towards the realisation of a developed and informed nation: A challenge for educators, Gaborone, 2003: 2.

²⁶T. M. Matshediso, “Colour Sermons with ‘Botho’”, *The Midweek Sun*, Wednesday, August 4, 2004: 4.

do certain things. *The Botswana Daily News*²⁷ reports in an article entitled “*A dikereke di palelwa ke go sireletsa botho?*” (Are the churches failing to protect *botho*?) that Professor James Amanze urged graduates at a bible institute in Tlokweng to speak out for justice and against the violation of rights and injustice. He basically urged the church to take moral responsibility for the well-being of Batswana and to ensure that moral uprightness is the norm.

In the field of applied ethics, moral philosophers have argued on the basis of personhood as the defining and morally significant factor in determining what should or should not happen to an organism. The example of abortion is a case to ponder about (Tooley; Thomson). In many traditions, dogs would not be allowed to eat a human carcass whereas they would be allowed to eat carcasses of other organisms. It is also clear that only human beings have moral responsibilities.

The above imply the critical nature of understanding what human beings are and how that understanding is of paramount importance in dealing with moral issues like HIV & Aids. This means unless we understand the inseparability of ethics and humanbeinghood, we will never adequately address the problems and challenges posed by moral issues. Put another way, if we do not understand humanbeinghood we are not likely to raise moral questions when they need to be raised.

Ethics and Human Life

Ethics permeates the whole of human life. This suggests an intricate linkage of ethics and humanbeinghood. This is critical because as a matter of fact *there is no human relationship that has no moral implication*. It is very clear that human beings are social animals and that there can never be immoral and moral acts without implying the involvement of a being that has some kind of personality. Therefore students of ethics have to appreciate, identify, realise and recognise moral questions that arise in any situation of human activity.

To put this rather crudely, *every human action is either right or wrong, or has the potential to be, in the moral sense*. For example, when I sit at table and eat my food, it is not a morally neutral activity. A student of ethics would ask a lot of questions about my activity. Am I eating whilst a starving child is nearby watching every movement of my hand? What moral right am I exercising in eating? What other moral right could I be violating? Which of the moral rights are at conflict? How can they be resolved?

Given the array of questions that arise from an apparently simple activity like eating, what else would be expected to arise from a complex issue such as the HIV & Aids phenomenon? The student of ethics does not simply see a complex web of questions arising from the phenomenon. It is learning to see how these questions arise and how complex they are that sets the student of ethics apart from the rest. It is in this sense that he or she is applying ethics. Ethics is no longer just about speculating but has practical consequences.

Application of Applied Ethics

Applied Ethics and HIV & Aids

In situations that require us to make a decision, we base the decision we make on either a theory or intuition. In studying ethics, we seek to understand why and how people ought to make certain moral decisions. The question of which moral theory to use in the case of HIV & Aids is ably raised by Tinyiko Maluleke:

The HIV/Aids epidemic brings issues of personal and individual ethics and morality to the fore once again. Few issues expose the importance and implications of personal morality and personal choices more than this epidemic. Here, our interdependence as human beings is displayed in all its destructiveness. Here, the personal is devastatingly communal and political. What ethic shall guide our discussion of the HIV/Aids epidemic? Or shall we merely be practical about it? Shall we simply advise people to use condoms and then leave them to their own devices? Will it be the ethics of reinvented racism and cultural arrogance of yesteryear—where HIV/Aids is seen to be the disease of blacks, people in the third-world and women because of their moral “infancy”? Or will it be an ethic informed by a view of the world as consisting of the saved versus the unsaved—the saved being the HIV- and the unsaved being the HIV+ and those with full-blown HIV/Aids?²⁸

For example, if we apply the theory of individual rights, we would be faced with problems like which right and whose right should prevail. A HIV+ person, who has the right to life, love, sex and health just to mention a few, can cause problems for the society if he demanded those rights in certain contexts. For example, if he demanded his right to sex and claimed his other right to privacy and confidentiality, it could be immoral to grant him those rights. National interest could be jeopardised by his behaviour in case he decides to be promiscuous without using any protection. Now when we teach human rights, we have to ensure that their complexity is appreciated by the learner. In the case of a HIV+ person, it would appear that the simple theory of human rights is not sufficient. We might need to appeal to the theory of human dignity as well as utilitarian considerations. In order to bring these to the fore, learners have to understand that in ethics there are only reasonable answers to human rights questions, never definite ones.

It is also apparent that knowing something does not necessarily mean people will always behave according to that knowledge. A good ethics experience would emphasise the need to relate theory and practice. If it is the case that many people know that HIV & Aids is largely transmitted through sexual contact (I believe they do), and that abstaining from sex will greatly reduce chances of them getting infected with the disease (I believe they do), and they do not want to be infected with the disease (I believe they do), the reasonable thing for them to do is to abstain from sex; but they do not abstain from sex and many even do not use condoms. There has to be a linkage between knowledge and behaviour. The question is do people make that linkage? The

²⁸See Maluleke, 2003:68

moral philosopher in this case might be interested in finding out why people seem to behave in a way that is not consistent with what they know. Is it because of weakness of will?

For example there were media reports in Botswana that people living with HIV & Aids had been discriminated against and were stigmatised on the basis of their HIV & Aids status.²⁹ Sometimes people suspected of being HIV+ lost their jobs and had no legal recourse. Botswana Network of Law, Ethics and HIV & Aids (BONELA) started campaigning for the introduction of legislation that would protect the infected people from stigmatisation and victimisation. This is a relevant subject of applied ethics because there are many moral issues that arise. The student of applied ethics has to know what the issues are. For example, among other things the moral responsibility of government is important. Does government have the moral responsibility to protect people infected with HIV? What is the basis of that moral responsibility?

To answer the last question, the student uses a theory or some theories of government. For example, according to Thomas Hobbes the justification of government is that it is for the protection of society's life.³⁰ Each member gives up part of their natural rights to the government so that it can protect the most important ones such as the right to life and well-being. Clearly victimisation and stigmatisation are against the infected people's well-being, which the government has to protect. So the government has the duty to protect the infected not only by legislating against employers, but also to ensure that the people are not discriminated against.

The need to protect HIV+ persons also raises other moral issues. For example, the government has the duty to protect businesses and employers some of whom are discriminating against HIV+ employees. This creates a dilemma for the government—which rights should be protected, those of HIV+ employees or those of the employer? Whereas employers have the right to do what is in their power to make profit, the government has a duty not to interfere in private business. Here we are dealing with the concept of conflict of rights. If there is a conflict of rights, which one should prevail and why? Some solutions have been suggested. First, since rights are hierarchical in importance, rights that rank higher should prevail over those that are ranked as lower. In the case of HIV and business, some suggest that the right to make profit is lower than the right to good livelihood free from stigmatisation and victimisation. So government must protect HIV+ persons against any form of discrimination. This solution of course raises questions on the basis of hierarchicalising the rights.

The second solution is the application of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is the theory which teaches that a moral action is one that results in the most good for the majority affected. If people are taken as dispensable or disposable effects of companies, the

²⁹See "This Law is Overdue" in *Mmegi*, vol.23, No.169, Thursday 9, November, 2006,

³⁰R. Scruton, *A short history of modern philosophy*, London: Routledge, 2002, 204ff; H. Hoffding, *A history of modern philosophy, : A sketch of the History of Philosophy from the Close of the Renaissance to Our Own Day*, London: Dover Publications, 1955: 279ff.

³¹Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. (London: Penguin Books.Mackie, 1977), 125ff.

consequences are not likely to lead to the most happiness for the majority affected or infected.³¹ Utilitarianism argues further that a law is morally right if its enactment results in the most good for the majority. The contrary is morally wrong. It is therefore a moral wrong not to enact such a law when its enactment will result in the most good or happiness for the majority.³² So the government ought to enact a law protecting those infected with HIV & Aids.

Immanuel Kant argues that victimisation and stigmatisation of HIV+ employees is morally wrong because it is treating them merely as means rather than ends in themselves. That is what businesses and employers do when they seek to dispense with their sick employees. It is also noteworthy, Immanuel Kant further argues that the victimisers and stigmatisers would not like to be treated the way they treat affected employees. That means, what they are doing is wrong.³³

Batswana would not accept the mistreatment of some members of society especially when they are vulnerable because it would not be *botho* to do that. The conflict between the well being of employees and profits cannot mean dispensing with people because according to the Setswana conception of morality, *ga le ke le feta kgomo le tlhaba motho*.³⁴ This means – *the sword or spear should never be allowed to pass a cow and pierce a person*. Here a cow represents valuable property and the sword or spear represents killing. The saying means that if a person were to choose between allowing a person to die and dispensing with property the latter should always take precedence. This arises from the fact that according to the *botho* theory a human being is much more important than property and would never be traded for property.

Applied Ethics and Business

Applied ethics can be related to business through philosophising and asking relevant questions. This application can also be referred to as business ethics. For example, if people have rights at all, what are the legitimate moral rights of a business person? What are the rights of the business' stakeholders? Who are the relevant stakeholders? Does business have a different morality or ethics that is unique to it? Do other professions and ways of life have their own ethics? Does a business person have moral duties and rights?

Separatism is the view that every profession has its own ethics. It also holds that ordinary ethics is not the same as professional ethics. According to this view business has its own ethics. That is why business people are allowed to do things that they would otherwise be illegal in ordinary life. For example, through advertisement, businesses sometimes lie, cheat, bribe and mislead consumers in their pursuit of profit.³⁵

³²Mackie, *Ethics*.....:136.

³³Price, *Philosophy*.....: 244ff.

³⁴M. O. M. Seboni, *Diane le Maele a Setswana*, Cape Town: Lovedale Press, 1962: 31.

³⁵See J. B. R. Gaie, *The Ethics of Medical Involvement in Capital Punishment*, Boston: Kluwer Academic Press, 2004; A. Z. Carr, "Is Business Bluffing?" in J. C. Callahan (ed.), *Issues in Professional Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Some philosophers have argued against this position for various reasons. The arguments are based on the theoretical bases of the philosophers' perspectives. Joseph Gaie (2005) advances two arguments; first, from a moral theoretical point of view, businesses have moral responsibility. Second, the Setswana concept of *botho* can and should be appropriated in viewing the moral responsibility of business. Mogobe Ramose would agree with this view because for him the whole of life is analysable in terms of *botho* for Setswana speakers, which represents a genuine African Philosophy.³⁶

Mel Streeter argues against the concept of separatism. For example, he holds the view that it is not fair for executives in the United States of America to be paid huge salaries that appear to be way beyond their contribution. He also holds that it is morally wrong for bidders – whether individuals or companies – to bid low so that they can win tenders. Some do so with full knowledge that they cannot fulfil what is required in the bid. He believes that values are important in business and corporations should be held morally responsible for such actions. For him, the moral status of a customer is important. He would not deal with a customer who is immoral.³⁷

The above example demonstrates the practicality of applied ethics. It is practical in the sense that we use it to try and solve everyday problems in business. For example, the University of Botswana has a transactional relationship with the contractors who sell services to it. It also has such a relationship with its employees. The questions of fairness and justice always arise. For instance, is the university in the business of selling parking space to its employees? If yes, what is the fair price? Do the University of Botswana employees have the right to come to work and park their vehicles for free at their place of work? These questions are important as we shall demonstrate below. On 14 November 2006, the University of Botswana trade unions led their members to withdraw their labour. They were aggrieved by the fact that in their view, the University was not being fair in providing parking space for employees. A solution to such a disagreement would involve the theory about fairness between employee and the employer and about good ethical conduct.

Applied Ethics and Politics

Just before the 1999 general elections in Botswana, Messrs Otladisa Koosaletse, Mokgweetsi Kgosipula, Paul Rantao and others defected from the Botswana National Front (BNF) to form the Botswana Congress Party (BCP). When defecting, they argued that the Botswana National Front was not a party that could take the voters anywhere. Their intention was to make the people believe them and sympathise with their cause. All of them had been members of parliament on a Botswana National Front ticket. Mr Otladisa Koosaletse went on to become the leader of the BCP. As fate would have it, they lost the 1999 general election.

Later on Paul Rantao defected from BCP and rejoined BNF. He later went on to win a parliamentary seat in the 2004 general elections. In the same elections, his

³⁶Ramose, *African Philosophy...* 2002.

³⁷Boyle, *Business Ethics...*: 16ff.

colleagues – Messrs Koosaletse and Kgospula not only lost their parliamentary seats but also went on to lose their leadership positions in the BCP party. Kgospula then left the BCP and rejoined the BNF. Koosaletse followed suit. On rejoining the BNF, Kgospula did not speak well about his former party.

Why am I giving this example? We can see a common trend about these people. When they were with BCP, they urged voters not to take BNF seriously – and vice versa. In these theatrics and defections back and forth, they urged people to change their minds and follow them without a very good justification for that change. The question is – were they telling the truth? Are they doing all these in order to win the election?

Separatists would say that even if these politicians lied, that is what is expected because political ethics is not the same as ordinary ethics. Politicians sometimes twist the truth, tell half-truths, smear their opponents and do other things which an ordinary person would flinch from. For example, under normal circumstances friends support and advice each other especially when one is in trouble. But this did not happen with the leader of opposition, Mr Otswetse Moupo. His law firm was struck from the register for non-compliance with the law. The grassroots members of the party supported him. However, the *Sunday Standard*³⁸ reported that “But he does not say the same about his long time bosom friends, some of whom went beyond plotting his downfall, and called for his resignation.” It reports some kind of plot by some of his close friends to remove the leader – according to one Kanjabanga. The leaders named were Ms Kathleen Letshabo (Vice President of the party), Dr Elmon Tafa, (Secretary for Political Education) and Mr Akanyang Magama (Secretary General).³⁹ If the reports were true, we see evidence of unfaithfulness, betrayal and ambition. The fact that political allies were unfaithfulness to the leader is not a surprise given the accepted view that “politics is a dirty game.”

Even though, some philosophers of ethics believe that politics is not a dirty game and that politicians need to be moral just like in other professions. In fact, Plato not only expected his leaders to be rational but also have moral uprightness, he thus argues that, “as wise rulers, they will exhibit kindness and justice to all.”⁴⁰ Plato can teach our present day politicians that reason is the basis of good governance. We can use his argument to show that some states in Southern Africa were advanced economically because the leaders were wise. The most important thing is that wisdom includes *botho* in the Setswana traditional thinking, which excludes *go tlhalefela kwa thoko*—being cunning as referred to above. It is a moral concept. Just like in the case of Plato who believed that reason implied morality, the Setswana concept of *botho* implies morality. So there is no proper political ethical behaviour if there is no *botho*.

³⁸*Sunday Standard*, “Moupo Bares his Soul”, 13.11.2006

³⁹R. Gabathuse, “Kanjabanga Exposes BNF ‘Coup Ploters’ in *Mmegi*, vol. 23, No.131, 9/4/2006, 4:51:43 PM (GMT+2).

⁴⁰Price, *Philosophy*... 65; Gaie, “The Relevance...”, 2001.

It is of course clear that the *botho*-type of political ethics is antithetical to the Machiavellian position. Niccolo Machiavelli sees the political leader as a cunning character that can be a fox, lion, dove or snake depending on the circumstances. It is important for the student of political ethics to be aware of the arguments advanced in favour or against most of these positions. The philosopher like we said at the beginning, attempts to have the serious questions answered or clarified. They would also want to see what particular theory of right and wrong is mostly applicable and reasonable. As a disinterested discipline, the political ethics subject does not necessarily expect the student to hold any particular view. It only hopes the student is aware of the profundity or otherwise of the different theories advanced. If the student happens to choose one or some of them, it is on the basis of a rational position that can be respected even by those who oppose it.

Applied Ethics and Sports

We start with three case studies in sports that can be subject to applied ethics. First, Colwyn Rowe, the coach of the Botswana national football team was reported to be short listed by the Zambian football body for a coaching job in that country.⁴¹ He had not yet completed six months into his two year contract.

Second, Mr Stanley Mwanga was dismissed by Gaborone United before the end of his contract. He had led the team in just a few matches into the 2006/2007 football season.

Third, when the Botswana national football team went to Tunisia in 2005, they threatened to boycott the game because the football association was not willing to give them incentives. That led to the formation of a commission of inquiry into the matter. The commission while appreciating that the association did not have enough money opined that it was imperative that it finds means of increasing the players' allowances and incentives.

Diphetogo Selolwane and Mogogi Gabonamong later reportedly refused to play for the national team unless they were given appearance fees.⁴² The Botswana Football Association was reported to have claimed that the players wanted to be paid P8 000 as appearance fee. The players said that they were willing to negotiate a figure which could have been around P5 000. These developments led to a debate as to whether the players were justified in "letting the nation down" and appearing like mercenaries lacking in patriotism. The players and some other people argued that the players relied on football for a living and therefore deserved due remuneration. The football association allegedly claimed that the players owed their success to it since it exposed and marketed them. Therefore, it further argued, they were being selfish and ungrateful in their demands.

Diego Maradona, an Argentine former football player scored the winning goal for Argentina in the 1986 FIFA World Cup to deny England a chance in the quarter-

⁴¹T. Molwane, "Rome for Zambia?" in *Mmegi* vol. 23, No. 169, 11/9/2006, 4.

⁴²C. Lepenga, "Of Patriotism and Personal Aggrandizement" *In The Sunday Standard*, 11/9/2006.

final round. Later on he agreed that he used his hand to score the goal. The result was that the people who had bet that England was going to win lost their money. The prize money went to those who bet for Argentina.

Also, some football players cheat and pretend that they have been injured and try to get their opponents sent off the field. Others not only feign injury but also try to deceive the referee into awarding a penalty against their opponents.

In others cases, players who practice faithfully are not named for the matches that follow the training. This means some coaches and officials have their favourite players who are treated differently from other players. Some coaches pick players who are not as good and leave the good players on the bench thereby denying them the opportunity to showcase their game. In some cases in Botswana local players were not paid while those recruited from outside the country were paid. The locals were expected to play for their love of the club. They were supposed to volunteer their skill.

In the case of the sports associations and the country at large there is the question of sports administration and the creation of a conducive environment for the promotion of sport as a developmental issue. That has not yet happened for Botswana and the question is whose moral responsibility is it?

It is also clear that some companies take sports as their business. For example, companies that sponsor sporting clubs get mileage from the sponsorship. Their products are advertised through the clubs and their merchandise sold on the basis of its association with the clubs. If the sponsorship fee is so little but the benefits to the company huge, what would be the justification for the continued relationship between the two entities? Is that justifiable? In addition, agents have made selling players their business. They sell players for huge sums and pocket hefty commissions compared to what the players get. How is this justifiable? Is it moral? Also, a club might demand a huge transfer fee while keeping a player who wants to join another club for a lesser amount. What are the moral issues involved and what is the moral justification for any solution to this problem?

The moral philosopher of sports looks at all the above mentioned issues, asks the morally important questions and their rationale or morally acceptable solutions. In other words, what is wrong with cheating the referee? What is wrong with failing to administer sports in such a way that the citizens benefit? What is the moral responsibility of government regarding sports? Does government have any responsibility? When is this responsibility fulfilled? What is the duty of the nation towards their sports persons? What is the duty of an individual to their nation? When is it fair for someone to volunteer their services and how far can that be taken? Is it morally right for an employee to seek other employment even when he has promised his employer to work for the duration of his contract? Is it morally right to terminate somebody's employment contract without much thought and consideration? The issues of moral right and wrong in sports are the legitimate concern of the moral philosopher of sports or sports ethics.

Conclusion

We started this chapter with a definition of philosophy, which in my view is necessary in order to have an adequate understanding of ethics. At a general level, ethics is a type of philosophy and a philosopher is a special kind of person—one who studies wisdom. Being wise is necessarily the exhibition of certain types of behaviours.

Applied ethics is making use of theories to address the issues that arise in everyday life. In ethics, we define what it means to say that a thing is morally wrong or right. We determine the moral, immoral and non-moral in theory. Using the theories, we then try to decide whether certain behaviours and actions are morally right.

We then saw how applied ethics can be related to HIV/Aids, politics, business and sports. We also argued that in the Setswana tradition, there is no differentiation between applied ethics and theoretical ethics. The concept of *botho*, which is key in understanding moral wrong from a Setswana point of view does not allow such a distinction. It is however possible for one to assume that understanding *botho*, or the concept itself is behind the theory of right and wrong.

It is expedient to point out that we are engaged in applied ethics when we attempt to decide the morality of certain actions besides the ones discussed above. For example, the questions of abortion, the environment, affirmative action, gender and feminism raise moral issues. Others include capital punishment, corporal punishment, homosexuality, heterosexuality, paedophilia, zoophilia, stem cell research and many more.

Applied ethics is the attempt to say that there is nothing that can be said to be wrong without a rational basis. It is also asking what that rational basis is. Finally, in applied ethics, we proceed from the fact that there is nothing that has no ethical angle to giving or attempting to give that ethical angle.

A student of applied ethics is a philosopher who tries to marry speculative theoretical argumentation with practical existential situations that they or other people face everyday. So, philosophy in this instance is not just pursued for the sake of knowledge alone. It is not just understanding and being conscious or aware of the nature of moral behaviour and moral reasoning. Philosophy is also pursued so that human beings can learn not just how to interfere or intervene in nature and society but also to do so in a rational manner.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Philosophical Metaphysics in Africa

Kipton Jensen

Introduction

In broad terms, metaphysics as a branch of philosophy is preoccupied with several perplexing and seemingly perennial questions concerning the structure of reality. More specific definitions of philosophical metaphysics depend on individual approach to the discipline of philosophy itself. Furthermore, the terms used in the definitions always require qualification.

In this Chapter, we shall discuss the history of metaphysics, African philosophy, the philosophical trajectory and related metaphysical questions thematically.

The history of metaphysics is discussed from the time of Aristotle (384-322 BCE). In understanding of philosophical metaphysics in Africa three instructive approaches are used: ethnophilosophy, universalism, and philosophical sagacity.¹ The three approaches propose different answers to the recurrent question concerning the existence of a distinctively African metaphysics. Metaphysical inquisitiveness serves as one of the distinguishing characteristics of human consciousness: reflective thought rooted in the feeling of awe and marvel at the world around us.

Classical Philosophical Metaphysics

The history of metaphysics started in the times of Aristotle (384-322 BCE), to whom Aquinas (1225-1275) referred to simply as “the philosopher”. The technical term “metaphysics” is therefore traditionally associated with him. However, the philosophical themes contained within metaphysics are not only “pre-Socratic” but perhaps as old as the human species itself.

Whereas the Psalmist teaches that the “awe (sometimes translated as *fear*) of God is the beginning of wisdom,” Aristotle suggests that philosophy begins in wonder (‘amazement’ or ‘bedazzlement’ or ‘awe’). And while the conceptual vocabulary of academic or professional philosophical metaphysics is often quite technical and abstract, the themes addressed by metaphysics are animated by awe-inspiring and child-like

¹The difficulty of classifying the various schools of thought within the canon of African philosophy is discussed in Oruka (1990), Outlaw (1992) and Serequeberhan (1991).

questions like: What ultimately explains the order – or disorder, for example, a regional drought, flood or an individual ailment – of the universe? How are we to understand the world in which we live? What is the self? What is one's relationship with others and rest of the cosmos? What is his or her responsibility towards others? What comes after death? What takes place before birth? Is there a God? Or are there several gods? How are humans related to the Divine? What is thought? What is ultimately real? Are persons free? Are they self determining, or are their actions determined by outside forces?

Western philosophical traditions have traditionally obfuscated if not, threatened to suppress indigenous philosophical traditions elsewhere including African, Asian and Persian metaphysical thought. Even for those who contest their dominance or canonicity – at the very least – they acknowledge an association by disassociation with Aristotle's conception of metaphysics.

Etymologically, the term metaphysics is a Greek term: *ἡ ἀπὸ τῆς φυσικῆς* (*meta*) = “after”, *ἡ ἀπὸ τῆς φυσικῆς* (*phsiká*) = “those on nature.” The editor of Aristotle's works, Andronicus of Rhodes, placed the first books of philosophy right after another work, *Physics*, and called these books *ἡ ἀπὸ τῆς φυσικῆς ἀπὸ τῆς φυσικῆς βιβλία* (*ta meta ta physika biblia*) or, “the books that come after the [books on] physics.” The relationship between the books on physics and *the books next to them*, the ones dealing with what we now call metaphysics, is intimate. Metaphysics seeks explanations that extend beyond the reach of the *Physics* (as the principles of the natural universe), yet it informs physics and keeps it in check. In this sense, metaphysics was in the middle ages considered to be the queen of the sciences. If metaphysics is the queen of the sciences, as claimed by scholars, her philosophical prodigy are *ontology*, *theology* and *universal science*. These are defined as follows: *ontology* – the study of being or existence; *theology* – the study of God; and, *universal science* – the study of those things which are fundamental to all science before one adds the particular details of any one science. These three categories correspond to the three areas of inquiry contained in Aristotle's ‘metaphysical texts’ and still serve as the primary branches of traditional Western metaphysics.

Although it makes sense to trace the history of metaphysics to Aristotle, his metaphysical system was beholding not only to Plato and Socrates but also – as mentioned above – to the pre-Socratic cosmologists. One need not be a philosopher to wonder about the distinction, which is at once theoretical and practical, between appearance and reality. For most of the pre-Socratic philosophers, one of the chief characteristics of reality is permanence or changelessness. For example, saying that God or the order of the universe is the same today as yesterday and forever – is but one of various ways of saying that something is real to the ultimate degree. It suggests that the thing remains the same or endures through time. However, there are exceptions to this view, like that of Heraclitus. On the contrary, impermanence or instability indicates lesser degrees of reality if not illusion.

The classical Greek philosophers go to great pains to explain the epistemological process by which one allegedly escapes ignorance and mere opinion if not deception in order to grasp the stable and enduring truths. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – above

all others excel in this discourse. Plato's answer to the question of what is most real, and what is illusory, serves as both a touchstone and a turning point in the history of philosophical metaphysics. The relatively technical and abstract theory developed by Plato, often referred to as the 'theory of forms,' is illustrated masterfully in a story – aptly named “Allegory of the Cave” – as told by Socrates.²

The Allegory of the Cave

[Socrates speaking with Glaucon:] And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: Behold! Human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

[Glaucon:] I see.

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Yes, he said.

And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Very true!

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

²In this respect, at least, in rendering explicit if not also systematic what is implicit or embedded in stories or myths or religious world views, it is perhaps not unfair to say that Plato was himself an ancient ethnophilosopher of the highest order!

No question, he replied.

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images. That is certain.

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision – what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them – will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

Far truer!

And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

True, he said.

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun itself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

Not all in a moment, he said.

He will need to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

The Allegory of the Cave, as interpreted by Socrates,³ is transformed by Plato into an ontological theory – i.e., a critical hypothesis by which to distinguish between the most real from the less real as well as the altogether illusory. The ‘bedazzlement’ experienced by the released prisoner, as he or she emerged from the den with an eye cast toward the upper or yonder world, is analogous perhaps to what Matsieng experienced as he emerged from the underworld into Southern Africa. Viewed as the ascent of the soul from the world of appearances and shadows to a truer world of substantiality and seemingly eternal verities, Plato argues that the ‘form’ or essence or exemplar of goodness – or compassion or justice or piety or even triangularity – is the source from which all existing things participate or exemplify to greater or lesser degrees. The philosophical effort to grasp if not also explain reality as it really is, and to gaze upon our own proper place within that scheme of existence, and not another, expresses the traditional task of metaphysics.

And while Plato’s theory of forms may well have set the tone for philosophical metaphysics, providing the inspirational economy for much of what belongs to western metaphysics and epistemology,⁴ the theory itself was contested from the beginning. Plato’s disciple, Aristotle, with whom the term metaphysics is traditionally associated, argues that Plato’s “formal cause” provided an incomplete explanation of reality. For Aristotle, the reality is to be explained not only in terms of its formal causes (i.e., what something is essentially and that in virtue of which all other things are what they are) but includes also material causes, efficient causes and final causes.

³Here is the interpretation offered within Plato’s *Republic*: “This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.” This is not to say, however, that the shadows are unreal but rather that we should not confuse that realm from the context within which it exists – i.e., to treat a partial truth as if it were the whole truth.

⁴The canon of western metaphysics, indeed western philosophy in general, should itself be viewed in light of its own history and progress: To the extent that Descartes was trained in Medieval scholasticism, and the scholastics received most of their knowledge of Aristotle through Islamic and Persian scholars, which is most conspicuous in the shift from rational theology to natural theology in Aquinas, the link and perhaps dominance of the Aristotelian metaphysical view well beyond the middle ages was at one point historically contingent on the willingness of scholars from various traditions to enter into cross-cultural philosophical dialogue.

Aristotle's was but the first in a series of critiques that, at least by way of association by disassociation, continue to the present day.⁵ Though it oversimplifies the philosophical tradition, Whitehead once quipped that western metaphysics is a footnote to Plato! In the ancient world, it should come as no surprise. Science, metaphysics and theology were interwoven into a shared fabric or domain of inquiry. At present, much of what was assigned to metaphysics, e.g., explaining the laws of efficient causality within space and time has been reassigned to empirical sciences. But philosophical metaphysicians continue to grapple with this seemingly perennial task of explaining the nature of reality, describing the categories to which things exist, and analysing the structure by which the specified 'categories of being' are ultimately related to one another.

Approaches to Philosophical Metaphysics [in Africa]

Apart from ancient Greek philosophy, there are alternative philosophical worldviews like Chinese, Persian, Native American, German, French and African philosophy. These philosophies can be distinguished on three fronts: as a geographical phenomenon, as a shared sociological activity or an ongoing tradition, for example, from Socrates to Plato and Aristotle to at least Descartes.

Though it might make sense to distinguish ancient Greek philosophy or Western canon of philosophy from the other alternative philosophical worldviews, it oversimplifies the history of western metaphysics considerably. Such discernment assumes that classical Greek philosophers had regionally arrived at a critical consensus concerning the inner nature or what we might call the 'deep structure' of reality.

Even if pre-Socratic philosophers from as far away as Egypt shared a basic metaphysical question (for example, "What is the fundamental or primary or essential or underlying principle of the material world?"), their speculative answers are diverse to the extreme. *Water* was the proposed solution by Thales, *air* by Anaximenes, *the boundless or infinite* by Anaximander, *mind* by Anaxagoras, and *fire qua impermanence* by Heraclitus. Parmenides denied change altogether, suggesting instead that *permanence* and *unity* were the deep truths of the universe. Democritus conceived an *atomic theory* many centuries before it became scientifically accepted. Pythagoras suggested *number* or *ratios* or *proportions*.

These "pre-Socratic metaphysical theories," what metaphysicians treat as questions of ontology and cosmology, were preserved largely through the oral tradition. Even if Socrates was not illiterate, he did refuse to put his arguments in written form. When wrested from the dialogical or dialectical context within which the words or theories are situated, the written text stands defenseless – argues Socrates in the *Phaedrus* – against misinterpretation or misrepresentation. If we limit the canon of Western philosophy or metaphysics to the body of collected literature from Plato onwards, the shared philosophical corpus, it is important to note that the Western canon sprung from an oral tradition from Socrates and the pre-Socratics.

Plato suggests that the world of forms or essences is real, and that the world in which we live is but a shadow of what is ultimately true. And Aristotle, though indebted to his teacher, Plato, as well as Plato's mentor, Socrates, disagreed by claiming that the universal form or essence of a particular entity provides but one aspect of a more complicated scientific explanation – one that included material, efficient and final causes. To treat ancient Greek philosophy “as a set of immutable and definitive beliefs” oversimplifies the history of philosophy. More egregious still would be to uproot those beliefs from history and progress. If this is true even of classic Greek metaphysics, it is doubly true when applied to vaster geographical regions or longer spans of history.

The diversity within the range of alternatives to a shared metaphysical question among the ancient Greek philosophers is relatively narrow, some will argue, compared to the diversity of metaphysical worldviews indigenous to the geographical vastness that is continental Africa. And while it may make sense to speak of an African philosophy, analogically, or a distinctively African metaphysics, it similarly oversimplifies things considerably – both the differences within Africa and the similarities of the enterprise with non-African philosophers – to assume that continental Africa provides or in the past provided a unified or univocal or monolithic answer to questions concerning the nature and structure of the universe.

P. Hountondji⁶ warns against a fallacy of assuming “primitive unanimity”: that is, of “treating African philosophy as a set of immutable and definitive beliefs abstracted from history and progress.” This analogy serves as an introduction to a delicate debate, globally but especially in Africa, concerning whether philosophical or specifically metaphysical truths are universally valid or whether they are, alternatively, true only relative to a specific if not unique culture.

Ethnophilosophy

One of the standard ways of approaching philosophical metaphysics in Africa during the 20th century was ethnophilosophy. In Samuel Imbo's concise definition, ethnophilosophers suggest, “philosophy is found embedded in the mythical, linguistic, and religious worldviews of the different cultures, and as such philosophy becomes unique to its geographical applications.”⁷ The task of ethnophilosophy consists in what Appiah calls “doing the natural history of ‘traditional’ folk-thought about the central issues of human life.”⁸ As both an example of ethnophilosophy, as well as a seminal figure in igniting the dominant debate about African philosophy, a Belgian missionary in the lower Congo, Fr. Placide Tempels – in *Bantu Philosophy*⁹ set out to make philosophically explicit what was implicit in the cultural forms of life of the Bantu. His

⁶P. Hountondji, *African philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 33.

⁷S. Imbo, *An introduction to African Philosophy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 8.

⁸Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18.

⁹P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine), 1959.

aim was to unearth and document or systematise as well as articulate traditional philosophical concepts and categories. These include the language, modes of behavior, institutions and customs. Critics of this approach often object that ethnophilosophers valorise the old ways without subjecting them to criticism and that they downplay the vast diversity within broad ethnological categories. Such include the variety within the family of Bantu-speakers – both past and present. The chief myth of ethnophilosophy, argues Hountondji, is that of “primitive unanimity” – that is, “the idea that in ‘primitive’ societies, everyone is in agreement with everyone else.”¹⁰

Temples argues that “we need not expect the first African who comes along, especially the young ones, to be able to give us a systematic exposition of his ontological system.” Nevertheless, thought Temples, an incipient ontology and metaphysical system does exist. Indeed, it informs if not also “dominates and orients all their behaviour.” And while there are those who believe that “ethnophilosophy, like other forms of colonial discourse, is an exercise whose primary aim is to justify European superiority,”¹¹ Tempels described the discovery of Bantu philosophy as a “disconcerting revelation” in which the “universally accepted picture of primitive man, of the savage, of the proto-man living before the full blossoming of intelligence vanishes beyond hope of recovery.”¹² Though shortsighted in other ways, this disconcerting revelation, in which “we want to speak as one tradition to another,” was a relative gain in the direction of a more accurate understanding of African philosophy.

For Tempels, the dominant feature of Bantu metaphysics is vital force. Vital forces are ranked in relation to their capacity to influence other forces. When Tempels looked deep into the ontology implicit within Bantu folkways, he discovered a view of the world that was not dissimilar to the *élan vital* philosophy he learned from western philosophers (especially, Henri Bergson).

Other ethnophilosophers agree with Tempels that the idea of vital force is central to the metaphysical rhythm of African philosophy. But, they disagree that African vitalism could have been fully understood by missionaries like Tempels. Leopold Senghor in his *African Socialism*, for example, claims that “the vital force of the Negro African, his surrender to the object, is animated by reason. Let us understand each other clearly; it is not the reasoning-eye of Europe, it is the reason of the touch, better still, the reasoning-embrace, the sympathetic reason, more closely related to the Greek *logos* than to the Latin *ratio*.”¹³ As we have seen, ethnophilosophers have latched not only to the importance of vital force as an answer to the metaphysical question about the nature of reality across Africa, but have also emphasised a uniquely African mode of knowing, a refreshingly non-individualistic notion of the self, and an essentially communitarian socio-ethical system.

¹⁰Hountondji, 107.

¹¹ See Hountondji [1996] and B. Hallen et al, “The House of the Inu: Keys to the Structure of a Yoruba Theory of the Self” in *Quest: Philosophical Discussions* 8, 1:3. 1994.

¹²Tempels, 167-8.

¹³Leopold Senghor, *On African Socialism*, (Stanford: 1964), 74.

Universalism

Contrary to the ethnophilosophical approach, universalism argues that philosophy is objective in its methods and decidedly non-relativistic. It is not culturally-dependent in its conclusions. According to the universalist approach, writes Appiah of Kwasi Wiredu, “there are no African truths, only truths – some of them about Africa.”¹⁴ Besides Wiredu, proponents of this approach within African philosophy include Henry Odera Oruka, Peter Bodunrin, and Paulin Hountondji. Despite their differences with those who believe that philosophical truths are relative to their geographical applications, many of these philosophers aim at a critical reconstruction of philosophical thought inherent in Africa’s rich oral traditions. Denying its claim for uniqueness, which assumes qualitative differences that are damaging to African philosophy in the long run, Wiredu claims instead that “the principle of rational evidence is not entirely absent from the thinking of the traditional African... The truth, then, is that rational knowledge is not the preserve of the modern West, nor is superstition a peculiarity of the African.”¹⁵ Hountondji puts it this way:

The problem, therefore, as regards our attitude towards our collective heritage, is how to respond to the challenge of cultural imperialism without imprisoning ourselves in an imaginary dialogue with Europe; how to re-evaluate our cultures without enslaving ourselves to them; how to restore the dignity of our past without giving room to a passeistic attitude. Instead of blindly condemning our traditions on behalf of reason, or rejecting the latter on behalf of the former, or making an absolute of the internal rationality of these traditions, it seems more reasonable to me to try and know our traditions as they were, beyond any mythology and distortion, not merely for the purpose of self-identification or justification, but in order to help us meet the challenges and problems of today.¹⁶

From a strategic point of view, “the view that anything will pass for philosophy will hurt the development of philosophy in Africa.”¹⁷ Given Hountondji’s ‘narrow definition of philosophy’ as the written literature of Africans engaged with universal philosophical problems, the worldviews described are not – strictly speaking – African philosophy. By African philosophy, Hountondji means “a set of texts written by Africans and described as ‘philosophical’ by their authors themselves.”¹⁸ In “Formulating Modern Thought in African Languages”, Wiredu suggests that

It would be a major step towards the correct formulation of modern thought in African languages if we in Africa were to cultivate the habit of thinking in our own indigenous

¹⁴Appiah, 104.

¹⁵K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 33.

¹⁶Hountondji, 136-7.

¹⁷Peter Bodunrin, *Philosophy in Africa; Trends and Perspectives* (University of Ife Press, 1985), 84.

¹⁸Hountondji, 97.

languages when talking... about issues involving concepts such as 'God,' 'Mind,' Person, Soul, Spirit, Sentence, Existence, and about categorical distinctions such as 'the Physical and the Spiritual,' the Natural and the Supernatural, the Religious and the Secular, and the Mystical and the Non-mystical."¹⁹

Samuel Imbo claims that it would be a mistake to think that Hountondji, Wiredu and others who agree with this universalistic line of thought, simply dismiss the value of traditional African beliefs. "There is value in recovering past traditions, but this value should not be overestimated, and the recovery of tradition is only the first step."²⁰

Philosophical Sagacity

In keeping with the etymological definition of philosophy, the sagacity approach to African philosophy focuses on individuals considered to be exceptionally wise by their respective communities – the African sages. According to the sagacity approach as put forward by Griaule, Hallen, Sodipo, and Oruka – the canon of African philosophy must include – non-literate as well as literate philosophical sages. On the contrary, Hountondji excludes sages.

Oruka, a Kenyan philosopher argues that the next step beyond the recovery of tradition involves distinguishing between two types of sages: folk sages and philosophical sages. Folk sages are those who are unwilling or otherwise unable to rise above the level of culture and the traditional communal outlook. For folk sages, suggests Oruka, "[a]nything outside or contradictory to the culture is treated with indifference and even hostility."²¹ In their social function, not unlike Socrates' own 'divine mission,' philosophical sages – both past and present display by way of contrast an "inclination [to] making a critical assessment of their culture and its underlying beliefs" (*ibid*). Although philosophy may begin at the level of culture, what Oruka calls first order thinking, philosophical sagacity is "a second-order activity that subjects culture to scrutiny and, if necessary, a transformative reconstruction."²² Rather than treating cultural thought as philosophy, Bodunrin suggests that academically trained African philosophers should examine as if to identify what "should be reformed, modified or conserved."²³

The sagacity approach interweaves many of the finer aspects of ethnophilosophy with the critical if not objective methods insisted upon by the Universalists. Despite their differences, each of these approaches is rooted in the concrete situation in Africa and is actively engaged in applying philosophical wisdom to the challenges now confronting Africa and, indeed, the rest of the world.

¹⁹K. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996), 51.

²⁰Imbo, 22.

²¹H. O. Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Nairobi: African Centre for Technological Studies, 1990), 52.

²²Imbo, 26.

²³Bodunrin, 78.

Central Questions of Metaphysics

It is sometimes said that ontology is the central branch of philosophical metaphysics. And in its preoccupation with questions of “what ultimately exists or exists to the fullest degree,” philosophical metaphysics distinguishes itself from epistemology. Epistemology (see Chapter 25), as the study of knowledge and belief, is concerned with ontology indirectly. In order to chart the limits and legitimating criteria of human understanding, the epistemologist is directly confronted with assessing the degree to which our minds are capable of understanding that which is ultimately true. Thus indirectly, epistemology overlaps in its concern with specifying if not categorising – and explaining the relationships between – that which exists.

Bearing Socrates’ Allegory of the Cave well in mind, Plato suggests the extraordinary thesis that “what exists most fully” or “that which best explains those things that exist” is its essence or form or idea or species definition. Plato’s ontological theory, the so-called “theory of forms,” suggests that there is an invisible yet essential pattern that informs the development of each existing thing. For example, to understand what a chair is, the fundamental thing – argued Plato – is to understand the essential pattern. The same applies to understanding questions like: What is a triangle? What does it mean to be a rhino as opposed to a zebra? What does it mean to be a member of the ‘homo sapiens’ species, or a person. What distinguishes a just or pious act from an unjust or impious one? In this way, Plato is offering an alternative theory concerning the pre-Socratic debate concerning the fundamental building blocks of – ultimately – whatever exists.

Plato’s theory of forms is but one solution to the question of how universal terms or ‘informing essences’ (i.e., Ltn: *esse* = what it is) relate to actually individual things (i.e., Ltn: *ens* = that it is). What explains both the similarities and differences between siblings within a single family as well as within an extended family or even all other human beings? How does one account for uniqueness or diversity within a family without ignoring the undeniable if not occasionally uncanny similarities? Is something born what it is, or must it be achieved over the course of its existence?

Philosophical metaphysics investigates objects and their properties, i.e., their attributes or features or distinguishing characteristics. What features are necessary (e.g., three-sided and enclosed), which are contingent (e.g., size and color and location), and what variations on those features is possible without changing its essential character (e.g., an isosceles or other kind of triangle)?

Beyond the investigation into what things are, both essentially and non-essentially, metaphysics is keen to understand also the relations that exist or might possibly exist between the objects of our universe. Whereas physics explores and strives to articulate the causal principles of the natural world, metaphysicians are often concerned with ultimate causal matrices that further explain, as if behind the *theatrum mundi*, the natural principles or physical laws of the universe.

Metaphysics also deals with the presuppositions underlying ordinary science. According to various traditions, both Asian and African, the diverse objects of the universe – which are conceived of not as objects but rather as forces in interaction

with other forces – are ultimately explicable in terms of the vital force of the universe. What an entity is, essentially, it is argued, is determined by its vital relations within a universe of active or latent forces. Metaphysical vitalism may well offer philosophers an engaging alternative if not a sage corrective to the ontological and cosmological theories professed by Plato and Aristotle. To what extent does the theory of vital forces [*seriti*] explain the ultimate origin of the universe, the ultimate constitutive parts of the universe, the ultimate structure and relations that obtain within the world of space and time, and – in some cases – the ultimate purpose of the universe? Aristotle, whose theology was informed by his ontology, provides a cosmological argument for the existence of God as the unmoved mover or uncaused cause of the natural world of objects and persons. How might our arguments for the existence of God change as a result of a shift from an essentialist-oriented ontology to a vitalist-oriented metaphysics?

Understanding the world around us will involve theories about how events unfold – by necessity or contingently, in terms of physical laws and, psychological, social theological reasons. When something happens, fortunate or not, alternative explanations can be offered: that it was fated, that it was inevitable or at least likely in view of preceding events, that the person was bewitched or unprotected, that it is necessary for personal or social development, that someone was irresponsible, or that it happened for no good reason at all.

Imagine that a fire occurs, and someone suffers because of it. In search for the reasons why, there will be scientific explanations concerning the means by which the event occurred. For example, that a match was dropped in the children's room, it then spread through the hall and into rooms A, B, C, etc., and eventually into room X, where it combined with flammable household goods. But we also require an explanation about the conditions under which someone had access to and unsafely struck the match (and triggered a series of subsequent natural events in physical space and time). Perhaps P1 gave matches to P2. P3 taught P2 a trick using matches. P4 and P5 failed to warn P2 about how dangerous it is to play with matches. P6, who was supposed to be supervising P2, left P2 unattended in order to answer a call from P7.

African metaphysicians may describe this kind of scientific explanation as 'second-order' causality, as opposed to 'first-order' causal explanations that include sociological, psychological, as well spiritual and economic or political explanations. After addressing 'second-order' explanations, some will say that we are yet to understand why this particular misfortune occurred to this or that particular person or family or community. For this, they might say, we require a supernatural or moral explanation (e.g., violation of taboo acts – e.g., *botlhodi* – or punishment by the gods). If supernatural explanation defies what might be viewed as the natural laws of the universe (e.g., miracles), which is not necessarily the case in many parts of Africa, the distinction between the natural and supernatural must be itself explained and the alternative explanatory matrix made clear or at least less opaque. Philosophical metaphysicians scrutinise the ways in which these various causal schemes complement or contradict one another, and what they teach us about the deep structure of the universe within which we find ourselves.

Philosophical metaphysics is concerned with four things: explaining the ordinary objects of our experience, the ‘starry skies above,’ the relations between objects and of each object to the whole and, lastly understanding the self. The whole is seen as greater than the parts. Parts are only the source, the absolute, that to which or to whom all things owe their sustained existence.

About the self, Socrates entreats us: “Know Thyself.” Metaphysics does not merely focus on the material, physical or biological features of what it means to be human. It also examines the seemingly non-material or non-physical characteristics of personhood. It explores self-consciousness, the immortality of the soul, our relations with departed ancestors, self- and social-identity, how the mind and body interact with one another and within specific environments, and whether decisions are determined by external conditions or by internal and self-causing volitions.

In discussing metaphysical theories of the self and the philosophy of mind, perhaps it is here, more than anywhere, that it is possible to see how the very formulation of a metaphysical problem can shape the direction of metaphysical inquiry. Since the time of the pre-Socratics, one of the persistent questions of western metaphysics concerns the nature of the mind and the soul in relation, often adversarial, to the material body. Since the time of Descartes, certainly, the philosophy of mind and personal identity has laboured to explain the nature of the mind as distinct from physical bodies (i.e., the so-called “mind-body” problem). Although some African metaphysicians believe that the ‘dualistic’ model is not dissimilar from indigenous theories of self-identity, others believe that the Cartesian model is incompatible with and indeed distorts traditional African theories of the self.²⁴ In an effort to debunk Cartesianism within the context of Akan metaphysical thought, Wiredu argues:

Should the reader be curious at this stage as to whether the mind too is quasi-material? In the Akan way of thinking, the short answer is that mind is not thought of as an entity at all but rather simply as the capacity, supervenient upon brain states and process, to do various things. Hence, the question as to whether mind is a spiritual or material or quasi-material entity does not arise.²⁵

Wiredu’s solution – or quasi-solution – to the mind and body problem consists in identifying a problem within the formulation of the problem itself when posed within an African context. Beyond identifying a possible objection to the Cartesian formulation of the self-identity, non-western metaphysical traditions suggest alternative and perhaps more fruitful explanations of ‘who we are’ and ‘how we might better relate to the world around us.’

²⁴Standard metaphysical answers to the so-called ‘mind-body problem’ are: substance dualism (including interactive dualism, pre-established harmony and occasionalism), monist theories of materialism and idealism, transcendentalism, and functionalism.

²⁵Wiredu, *Cultural Universals*, 51.

It is sometimes suggested that the African notion of the self, expressed in Xhosa as *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* [literally, 'a person is a person through persons'] is "common to all African languages and traditional cultures."²⁶

In Setswana, one says *motho ke motho ka batho* or *motho ke motho ka baba bangwe* (a person is a person because of other people). What is meant by 'person' in Setswana [*motho*] may well have more in common with Confucianism than it has with the western tradition from Plato through Descartes to dominant contemporary theories of personal identity. The Tswana notion of the person includes reference to that person's relations to other persons. Menkiti claims that "in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory."²⁷ On the contrary, persons:

...only exist in virtue of [their] relations to external forces: cosmic and social ones. And the very fact that [persons] only [exist] through [their] relations with the external world entails that [a person] possesses many distinct internal centres of personality, determined by these various relations.²⁸

The social ideal of African communalism or interdependence, wrote Senghor, at a time when many African countries were gaining independence, was "based both on the community and on the person and in which, because it was founded on dialogue and reciprocity, the group had priority over the individual without crushing him, but allowing him to blossom as a person."²⁹ And while it may be true in certain traditions that "personhood is something at which individuals could fail,"³⁰ other philosophical metaphysicians in Africa claim that, despite the fact that elders enjoy "an epistemological monopoly" over adolescents, "the young are not ontologically less human than the elders."³¹ If it is true that individuals are not born persons, is it true that an individual gains their personhood by virtue of their integration into the community of persons? 'Personhood' in this model is socio-ethical in character: one exists to the extent that one – as in Confucianism – fulfills one's duty to other persons as well as to ancestors and other spirits or forces. If one dies poorly, according to one tradition, one may well be denied access – or one will have disqualified oneself and one's prodigy – for the yonder realm of departed persons (*badimo*). If it is true that one is born with the

²⁶A. Shute, *Philosophy for Africa* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995), 46.

²⁷I. Menkiti, "Persons and Community in African Traditional Thought" in R. A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An introduction* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1979), 158.

²⁸I. Apostel, *African Philosophy: Myth or Reality* (Gent: Story-Scientia, 1981), 36.

²⁹Senghor, 5.

³⁰Menkiti, 159.

³¹N. D. N. Kaphagawani et al "African Epistemology" in P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux (eds.), *Philosophy from Africa* (Johannesburg: Thompson Publishers, 1998), 173.

necessary characteristics of personhood, that once the child is born they are a person (Seboni 1962: 25), “the child has the same metaphysical status as an elderly person.”³²

As part of a larger metaphysical outlook, one that understands the universe as an interdependent system or matrix or network of forces, self identity is explicable in terms that extend well beyond material or mental individuality. But rather than merely articulating an alternative model of personal identity, which takes up the intrinsically valuable task of recovering traditional metaphysics in Africa, philosophical metaphysicians will want to put this thesis to the test. For example, to what extent is the communal notion of the self consistent with individual human rights, even when the individual in question is not recognised by the community as a complete person? What are the practical consequences of giving priority to the community when it comes to the mounting difficulties of public health and social responsibility? And, how might this decidedly non-Cartesian notion of the self influence or otherwise shed light on the remaining set of metaphysical questions concerning the universe and our proper place within it?

Conclusion

As a discipline, Oruka suggests that “philosophy unearths hidden assumptions, implications, and contradictions in human experience.” Amending slightly Oruka’s definition for the present purpose – namely, to discuss the nature as well as the history and scope of philosophical metaphysics, the metaphysical enterprise consists not only in “unearthing the hidden assumptions, implications and contradictions” within alternative hypotheses concerning the structure of reality, it also involves – following the sagacity tradition philosophers – critically assessing their relative strengths and weaknesses. Philosophical metaphysics in Africa is a vibrant academic discipline, one that has theoretical as well as practical importance. The task of philosophical metaphysics in Africa involves recovering metaphysical traditions – as Hountondji puts it – “as they were, beyond any mythology and distortion, not merely for the purpose of self-identification or justification, but in order to help us meet the challenges and problems of today”.

³²J. B. R. Gaie, & S. Mmolai, “The Concept of Botho and the Methods of Fighting HIV/AIDS”, Paper Presented at the 6th Biennial National Conference on Teacher Education, University of Botswana, July 23-25: 3.

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Index of Personal Names

- Ackermann, D. 216
 Adams, C. C. 363
 Adogame, Afe 266, 279
 Ahermethy, G. L. 259
 Amanze, J. N. 115, 118, 123, 131, 136, 240,
 244, 245, 246, 267, 284, 294, 295, 306,
 310
 Anderson, W. B. 45, 46, 47, 60, 300
 Anthony, A. K. 545 547
 Apostel, L. 552
 Arnold, D. W. 62
 Asanti, M. K. 362
 Audi, R. 526
 Ayer, A. J. 449
 Azevedo, 358
- Baeta**, 321
 Baker, D. W. 62
 Bakare, S. 175
 Banana, C. S. 71, 167
 Bang, Peter, 30
 Banks, W. L. 202
 Barackman, F. H. 141, 142, 143
 Barmes, B. 345
 Barret, D. B. 170, 229, 231
 Barton, J. 51, 126, 133
 Barton, S. 100, 101, 104
 Bauch, W. 95
 Bayer, 323, 330
 Beals, R. L. 206
 Bediako, Kwame 128, 200
 Bell, Judith 187
 Bennett, Robert A. 125, 126
 Bentham, J. 513
 Berryman, Phillip 179, 186, 189
 Bewaji, J. A. I. 459, 460, 461, 463, 468, 476,
 480, 488, 502, 518, 519
 Bhebe, N. M. B. 163, 165, 236, 293
 Bhili, H. 163, 164, 165
 Bitek, Okot P' 266
- Blocker, H. G. 503, 510
 Blood, A. G. 134
 Brink, H. 255, 257
 Brown, R. E. 80
 Brummer, V. 405
 Boadt, L. 42, 43, 51, 55, 56, 58, 59, 61
 Boff, Clodovis 182
 Boff, Leonardo 191, 196, 199
 Bodunrin, P. 470, 547, 548
 Booth, N. S. 301
 Bourdillon, M. F. C. 168, 171, 172, 268, 269,
 273
 Boyd, R. 449
 Boylen, M. 524, 527, 533
 Buja, B. 207, 502
 Burkett, R. K. 202
- Callahan, J. C. 526
 Calvin, J. 246
 Camble, H. Y. 71
 Cannon, K. G. 109, 111, 339, 340, 468
 Capps, Walter H. 264, 265
 Caridad, Inda 28
 Ceresko, A. R. 46, 47, 48, 57, 65
 Chacalia, Maulama 366
 Chalmes, A. F. 418
 Chavunduka, G. L. 172
 Chiddy, S. 375
 Childers, M. 215
 Chirairo-Dude, L. 174
 Chirenje, 223
 Chitando, E. 164, 167, 168, 171, 174, 175,
 267, 269, 274, 275, 276
 Clalcraft, David J. 22
 Clarke, P. B. 346s
 Colenso, William 133
 Collingwood, R. G. 467
 Collins, G. O' 243
 Cone, Hames Hal 194, 205
 Cone, J. H. 202, 203, 208, 209, 210

- Cong, A. A. & Sedley, D. N. 439
 Connolly, Peter 263
 Choop, Rebecca 178, 181
 Copleston, F. 527
 Copper, T. 94, 95, 98, 101
 Cotter, David W. 21
 Cox, Harvey 181, 183
 Cox, James L. 264, 265, 270, 272, 276, 278
 Copleston, F. 527
 Cumpsty, 252, 261

Daneel, M. L. 131, 132, 172, 173, 175, 231, 232, 238
 Darwin, Charles 16
 Deissmann, A. 80
 Descartes, R. 442, 443
 Dhavamony, M. 256
 Dick, Michael 97
 Dickson, K. 133
 Diop, C. A. 461
 Donxel, Lewis & Pettal 306
 Double, R. 256
 Dovovan, V. 133
 Drane, J. 44
 Draper, J. A. 134
 Dube, M. W. 74, 91, 225, 226, 280
 Duke, P. 100
 Duling, D. C. 86

Eagleson, John 28
 Edman, I. & Jowett, B. 445, 446
 Ela, Jean 129
 Eliade, 252
 Erickson, M. J. 147
 Esack, F. 375
 Escobar, Samuel 194
 Evans, K. M. 187

Farrugia, E. S. 241, 244
 Felder, C. H. 119, 121, 122, 124
 Filson, F. V. 82
 Fiorenza, E. S. 222
 Fitzgerald, Timothy 274
 Flood, Gavid 264, 384, 388, 399
 Foot, P. 509
 Fries, H. 139, 145

Gabathuse, R. 534

 Gaie, J. B. R. 527, 532
 Gandhi, M. K. 382
 Gareth, Jones 146, 147, 149, 150, 151, 184
 Gayre, R. 356
 Gbadegesin, S. 470
 Gebura, Ivore 216
 Gerald, Collins O' 89, 93, 94, 101, 102, 104
 Gifford, Paul 272
 Gihellin, R. 167
 Gill, R. 146
 Goatley, D. E. 205
 Gonzalez, Catherine G 190
 Gonzalez, Justo 193, 194, 245
 Gonzalez, Justo 190
 Gordon, L. R. 471, 472
 Gottwald, Norman 116
 Grady, J. O' 98
 Grapps, Robert W. 291
 Groves, C. P. 310
 Grurebaum, G. E. 305
 Gundani, P. 167
 Gunkel, Hermann 20
 Gutierrez, Gustavo 179, 182, 188, 190, 192
 Gwassa, G. C. K. 292
 Gyekye, K. 403

Habel, Norman 41
 Haddad, B. G. 217
 Hallecreutz, 166
 Hallencreutz, C. F. 174
 Hanson, Bradley 184
 Hanson, R. P. C. 140
 Hanciles, J. 170
 Haron, Muhammed 358
 Harris, S. 36, 37, 38, 40
 Hartley, J. E. 54
 Hastings, A. 231, 313, 314, 315, 316, 318, 319, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 328, 329, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336
 Hatendi, P. 171, 172
 Hayes, John H. 19, 21, 58
 Hayes, S. 167
 Haynes, J. 373
 Henrelly, A. T. 188
 Hillary, Marian 178
 Hildebrandt, J. 290
 Hendersen, L. 308
 Hunwick, John 357

- Hunter, S. T. 368
 Hodgson's, Marshall 352
 Hoijer, W. 206
 Hooker, M. D. 79
 Hooks, B. 215
 Horton, R. 470, 481, 482
 Hountondji, P. J. 470, 545, 546, 547
 House, H. W. 203, 204, 219
 Hughes, Dewi 193, 292
 Hume, David 440, 441, 452
 Husserl, E. 257

Ibis, Yusuf 353
 Imbo, S. 545, 548
 Isichei, E. 308, 309, 320, 321, 324, 326, 329, 330, 332, 335

James, G. A. 266, 268
 Jenkins, M. 143, 144
 Johnson, L. 390
 Jules-Rossette, B. 246

Kahley, M. 79
 Kalahari, G. P. 171
 Kaiser, O. 39
 Kalaitzidis, P. 141
 Kant, Immanuel 450, 451, 508
 Kanyoro, M. 223
 Kaphagawani, N. D. N. 552
 Kaufman, C. 166
 Kealotswe, O. N. 234, 235, 240, 241
 Kendall, Daniel 89, 93, 94, 101, 102, 104
 Kettan's, Ali 355
 Kingsbury, J. D. 99
 Kirk, Adrew 177, 186, 191
 Kirby, J. P. 286, 289, 307, 310, 311
 Kirk, John 186
 Klostermaier, K. K. 386, 387
 Knappert, Jan 343
 Kokoli, O. H. 367
 Kolak, D. 517
 Kumbirai, J. C. 171
 Kummel, W. G. 75
 Kuhn, Thomas 430
 Kurewa, J. W. Z. 170
 Kwok, Pui-Lan 216, 225

Lacey, A. R. 522, 524, 525, 526

 Langford, T. L. 259
 Lapidus, Ira 354, 335, 441
 Lawhead, W. F. 400, 401, 406, 407, 411
 Lenher, J. 171
 Lennan, Richard 184
 Lepenga, C. 535
 Lewis, I. M. 305
 Linden, J. 164, 165, 300
 Lipner, L. 385
 Locke, John 447, 448
 Ludwig, Frieder 266
 Lukas, Vincent 133, 134

Macdonald, A. M. 159
 Mackenzie, R. 92
 Mackie, J. L. 495, 525, 526, 532
 Macquarrie, 140, 153, 156, 157, 158, 159
 Maimela, S. 201, 202, 203, 208
 Makinde, A. A. 467
 Maluleke, Tinyiko 197, 227, 530
 Marguerat, D. 99
 Marima, E. 165, 166, 167, 174
 Martin, R. P. 79
 Marwick, M. G. 286
 Marx, Karl 161, 344
 Masenya, M. J. 220
 Matthews, S. 222
 Matthews, V. H. 52, 53, 57, 58, 60
 Matre, Pierre de 287, 288
 Matshediso, T. M. 528
 Maxwell, David 273
 Mazrui, Ali 345
 Mbiti, J. S. 117, 118, 129, 133, 219, 240, 343, 403
 McBride, W. L. 467, 468
 McCann, Dennis P. 185
 McGrath, A. 155
 McKenzie, Peter 275
 McKenzie, Steve L. 120
 Menkiti, I. 552
 Menyatso, 528
 Mesters, Carlos 183
 Mgadla, 326
 Mickelsom, A. B. 91, 92
 Migliores, D. L. 140, 142, 148, 151, 152, 153, 155, 160, 161, 162
 Mill, J. S. 513
 Minton, A. & Shipka T. A. 403,

- Mmolai & Gaie 523, 528, 553
 Moffat, R. 223
 Mohanty, Chandra 215, 216
 Moltmann, J. 210
 Molwane, T. 535
 Momoh, C. S. 478
 Moore, B. N. & Bruder K. 403
 Morgan, R. 126
 Morton, A. 400, 401, 405, 406, 408
 Mpunzi, A. 209
 Mrefo, 129
 Mudenge, S. I. G. 164
 Mugambi, J. N. K. 166, 168
 Mukonyora, I. 174
 Muller, R. A. 142, 143
 Mullins, E. Y. 140, 145
 Mushete, Ngindu 127
 Mutambara 174
 Muzorewa, G. H. 174
- Nadkarni, M. V. 386, 387
 Nakatama 172
 Nangoli, M. 208
 Niditch, Susan 19
 Neil, Stephen 305, 309s
 Neville, R. C. 146, 154, 157, 158, 161
 Nicholls, W. 142, 143, 147
 Nkomazana, F. 320
 Norman, R. 509
 Norton, D. F. 440, 441
 Novak, Michael 178
 Novare, J. 94, 95, 98, 99, 101
 Nyamiti, Charles 133
- Obenga, T.** 459, 460, 463
 Oded, A. 367
 Oden, Thomas C. 117, 118, 120, 127, 128
 Oduyoye, M. A. 213, 216, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222
 Ogrizek, D. 207
 O'Hear, A. 405, 407
 Okure, Teresa 30, 222
 Oosthuizen, G. C. 238
 Oruka, H. O. 460, 470, 548
 Ott, M. 117, 129
- Palkar, S.** 216
Pals, D. L. 255
- Panneberg, W. 144, 145
 Parekh, Bhikhu 382
 Parrat, J. 140, 141, 145, 149, 150, 154, 155, 157, 159, 160, 161, 162, 170
 Parrinder, Geoffrey 303
 Phan, Peter 179
 Phiri, I. A. 213, 214, 217, 223
 Pityana, N. 201, 205
 Plantinga, R. J. 271
 Pobee, John 133, 199
 Pojman, 430, 496, 498, 501, 503, 523
 Popkin, R. 453, 454
 Prebish, C. S. & Keown, D. 383, 392, 415
 Price, J. A. 521, 532, 534
 Prozesky, Martin 274
 Purkiser, et al 59
- Rakotsoane, F. C. L.** 258
 Ramose, M. 473, 474, 475, 476, 409, 533
 Ramsey, A. M. 116
 Ranger, Terence O. 293
 Raphael, S. S. 500
 Ratzinger, J. C. 186
 Rawls, J. 512
 Ray, B. C. 165, 299, 301
 Rescher, N. 405, 406, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 432
 Ridley, B. K. 421
 Ripen, Andrew 343
 Ritzer, G. 237
 Rokoczy, S. 219, 223
 Robe, C. C. 178
 Robinson, R. H. 390
 Ronald, Canon 134
 Ross, Richard 291
 Rousseau 476
 Russell, Letty 196
 Ruele, Moji 197, 198
 Ruether, Rosemary Radford 185, 196
- Saayman, W. 134
 Sabrino, Jon 182, 189, 198
 Samkange, S. & Samkange, T. 507, 510
 Sanneh, Lamin 133, 300, 305, 316, 335
 Schaaf, Ype 119, 121, 125
 Schillebeeckx 184
 Schmidt, R. 254, 260
 Schoffeleers, M. 236

- Seboni, M. O. M. 532
 Segundo, J. 180, 182, 189
 Sergovia, F. F. 74
 Sertima, V. 466
 Sharpe, Eric J. 266
 Sicard, S. V. 366
 Sithole, N. 168
 Scruton, R. 531
 Senghor, L. 546
 Sen, A. 513, 514
 Sharma, Arvind 277
 Shaw, W. 502, 503, 506, 507, 509
 Shorter, Aylward 133, 285, 287
 Smith, Edwin 285, 286
 Sperling's, David C. 356
 Stacey, J. 144, 149
 Stanton, G. 75
 Sundkler, 231, 236, 238, 333
 Sugirtharajah, R. S. 180, 181
 Sweet, A. 90
 Sweetland, D. 99, 100

 Tamaz, Elsa 190, 192
 Tallis, R. 504
 Tate, R. W. 92
 Tempels, Placide 481, 545, 546
 Thiessen, H. C. 139
 Thiselton, A. C. 149
 Thomson, A. 256
 Trites, A. 102

 Verstraelen, F. J. 164

 Vidler, Ake, R. 308
 Viktor, K. S. 354, 378
 Vogel, S. W. 90, 93
 Voll, J. O. 354, 363
 Vuola, Elina 179

 Waadrenburg, J. 266
 Wach 251, 252, 253, 254, 255
 Wainwright, G. 140, 147, 151
 Waldrop, Charles 195
 Webster, D. D. 186, 187
 Weeden, T. J. 78
 Weiss, H. 378
 Weller, J. 164, 165
 Weller, J. 300
 West, J. K. 116
 Westerlund, D. 171, 305
 Whaling, F. 251, 253
 Wiebe, Donald 271, 279
 Wijngaards, J. N. M. 92
 Williams, B. 513, 497
 Williams, D. S. 215, 216
 Williams, P. 395
 Wiredu, Kwasi 486, 497, 501, 547, 548, 551
 Woodward, J. 147, 153
 Wulff, D. M. 252
 Wynne, R. 133, 134, 135, 136

 Yarnold, C. J. 156
 Yolton, J. 455
 Young, P. D. 215
 Yuan, B. 99

 Zahan, Dominique 285, 286
 Ziman, John 418
 Zvogbo, C. J. 165

Index of Subjects

- Abraham-Sarah Narrative 54
- Acts of the Apostles, Authorship, 79ff
- African Church, Thorns in the Flesh of 338
- African Culture and Religious beliefs/
Practice, Rejection of 329
- African Indigenous Religious Thought,
Major Elements of 297
- African Independent Churches 315
- African Independent Churches in
Botswana, the Typology of 238
- African Independent Churches in
Southern Africa, Theology in 229
- African Independent Churches
Theology, the problem in 229
- African Independent Churches, the
Emergence of 169
- Africa, the Colonization of 326
- African Theology 163
- African Theology in Zimbabwe,
Historiography of 170
- African Theology in Zimbabwe,
Roots of 167
- African Traditional Religion as a
Academic Subject 289
- African Traditional Religion, Challenges
and Prospects, the Future of 302
- African Traditional Religion, Definition
283
- African Traditional Religion in
Contemporary Africa, Challenges and
Prospects 283
- African Traditional Religion, Source
for the Study of 296
- African Traditional Religion, the Nature of
284
- African Traditional Religion, the
Resilience of 288
- African Women's Theologies, Features of
218
- African Women's Theologies, Theoretical
Framework for 213
- African Women's Theologies, Inter-
disciplinary and Multi-faith Nature
of 225
- African Women's Theologies, Race,
Class and Gender 225
- Africa's Muslims, Expressing their
Religious Identity 344
- African Muslim Political Participation 372
- African Muslims, Regional Spread of 348
- African Neo-logical Positivism 484
- African Philosophy 456, 487
- African Philosophy, African Political
Philosophy and Historians of 485
- African Philosophy and Philosophy in
Africa, the future of 491
- African Philosophy in Intellectual
Discourse 477
- African Philosophy, Historio-genesis
in 479
- African Philosophy, History of 487
- African Philosophy, Nature 464
- Agricultural Rites 123
- AICS, the Growth 328
- Aladura Churches, Zionist, Spiritual
and Prophetic Churches 331
- Amos, the Book of 47
- Ancestralhood 120
- Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) 86
- Apocalypticism 86
- Apostles, the Gospels and Acts of 75
- Applied Ethics 517
- Applied Ethics and Business 552
- Applied Ethics and Sports 535
- Applied Ethics, Application of 530
- Applied Ethics, Meaning of 526
- Applied Ethics and Politics 532
- Applied Ethics in Setswana 528

- Approaching New Testament Studies 73
 Aristotle's Virtue Ethics 505
 Aristotle's Ethics 505
 Art of Reading 93
 Author(s), the Role of 93
- B**anking, Islamic 377
 Baptism 244
 Bible and African Culture 118
 Bible and African Women's Theologies 224
 Bible, Critical Reading of 190
 Bible in African Christianity, the Centrality of 116
 Bible, Interpretation and Methods, a History of 9
 Black Theology, Major Themes 201, 204
 Blood, the Significance of 121
 Buddhism, Development of two Schools in 394
 Buddhism, Early Development 390
 Buddhist Teachings (Early) 392
- Canaan, Israel's Conquest of 60
 Canaan, Israel's Occupation of 43
 Canaan, Israel's Settlement in 60
 Canon 394
 Cartesian Scepticism 452
 Catholic Letters, Focus on James 85ff
 Catholic-Colonial Government Relations 320
 Celestial Church of Christ 333
 Cherubim and Seraphim Society 332
 Christian Theology and Theologians, the Task of 147
 Christian Theology, Characteristics of 149
 Christian Theology, Debate Concerning the Scientific Nature of 143
 Christian Theology, Tasks and Methods 139
 Christian Theology, Two Broad Divisions 140
 Christian Theology, who Qualifies to do it 146
 Christianity in Africa in the 20th Century 313
 Christianity in Africa, the Explosion of 316, 327
- Christian Missionaries 327
 Christocentric Approach, the Primacy of Scripture 152
 Church 246
 Church Growth Explosion, Causes of 326
 Church of Corinth, the Founding of 81ff
 Church of the Lord 333
 Churches in Africa, the Major Groups of 314
 Circumcision 121
 Classical Philosophical Metaphysics 539
 Communal Theology 222
 Contextualization, Quest for 151
 Conversion 97
 Covenant (Exodus-Deuteronomy) 59
 Correlation Approach 152
 Contemporary African Philosophical Thought 486
 Consequentialist Theories of Ethics 511
 Creation 51
 Critical Thinking and the Science 417
 Critical Thinking, Introduction 415
 Cultivating Empathy 269
 Cultural Affinity between African Culture and the Bible 119
- D**emocracy and Democratic Values 377
 Departure and Focus, Point of 203
 Deutro-Pauline Letters 83ff
 Development of two Schools in Buddhism 394
 Discipleship 98
 Discipline, Approaches in the Study of 255
 Divination 124
 Dogma and Church Traditions, History of 154
 Doing Theology, Sources for 153
 Dreams 124
 Dress Code 376
- E**ast Africa 357
 Economic Oppression 193
 Ecumenical Movements, Formation of 399
 Education 377

- Education and Bible Translation 325
 Egoism 511
 Egoism, Problems of 512
 Epic Era in Hinduism 387
 Epistemology 525
 Epistemology 438
 E-Source in the Pentateuch 16
 Ethics and Human Life 529
 Ethics, Meaning of 522
 Ethical Relativism 503
 Ethical Relativism, Objections to 505
 Ethiopian Independent Churches 330
 Ethnic, Racial and Cultural Oppression 193
 Ethnophilosophy 345
 Ethno-Philosophy 482
 Evangelical Zeal in the 20th Century 324
 External Factors 366
 Exodus, Book of Exodus 57
- Faith** 100
 Feminist and Womanist Criticism 25
 Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics 218
 Fire theme in the Bible and the African culture 124
 Fertile Crescent, Map of 36
 Festivals and Rituals in Hinduism 389
 Form and Literary Criticism 17
 Former & Latter Prophets 47
 Fuss about Naming 215
- Gender, Race, and Identity** 111
 Gender and Racism in Religious Stories, Ideology of 108
 General introduction to Philosophy, Tasks and Methods 399
 Globalization 371
 Gender Oppression 195
 God in Black Theology 205
 God the Father 239
 Good, Features of 506
 Gospels, Authorship of 76
 Gospels, the Dates of 77
 Gospels, the Purpose of 78
 Growth of Christianity, three stages of 319
 Growth of the Church, Factors Facilitating or Inhibiting 324
- Hagar-Narrative, Feminist reading of** 107
 Hebrew Bible, Background of 35
 Hermeneutical Presuppositions 189
 High God 120
 Higher Criticism, some examples of 15
 Hinduism and Buddhism, an Introduction 381
 Hinduism, Epic Era in 387
 Historical Background and Development 201
 Historical Books 42
 Historical Criticism & Social-Scientific 19
 Historical Praxis, Critical Reflection 188
 HIV & AIDS Sensitive Readings of the Bible 31
 HIV & AIDS as an Oppressive Disease 196
 HIV and AIDS Pandemic, Health Care Arena 375
 Holy Communion 245
 Holy Scriptures, the Human Face of 115
 Human Culture 159
 Human Experience 158
 Hypothesis, the Four Documentary 41
- Identity** 206
 Identity and Agency 344
 Induction, the Fallacy of 425ff
 Inductive Method 421ff
 Iran's 1979 Revolution 367
 Islam's Historical Spread across Africa 352
 Islamophobia and Terrorism, Cultural Sphere 373
 Islam Teachings, Source of 347
 Islamic banking 377
- J-Source** 16
 Jacob-Esau Narrative 56
 Jesus Christ in Black Theology 208
 Job, the Books of 45
 Joseph-Narrative, Analysis of 56
- Kant's Theory, Objections to** 510
 Kingdom of God 95
- Law, the Books of** 14
 Liberation and Postcolonial Criticism 28ff

- Liberation Theology 177
- Liberation Theology and Contemporary Social Challenges 191
- Liberation, Nationalism and Wars of 168
- Liberation Theology, Historical Origins of 179
- Liberation Theology, Sources and Norms of 183
- Liberation Theology, Some Leading Founders of 180
- Liberation Theology, Strengths and Weakness of 185
- Liberation Theology, Tasks of 182
- Liberation Theology Today, How Relevant is 197ff
- Liberation Theology, Methods in 187
- Logic 525
- Logic and Methodology 488
- Logic, Critical Thinking and Science 415
- Local Evangelists, the Role of 326
- Lot and His Two Daughters 112
- Love 104
- Lower Criticism or Textual Criticism 13

- Mahayana Buddhism** 394
- Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, Separation of 394
- Making of the Bible, Contribution of African Culture in 124ff
- Mantras and Rituals or Brahmanas, in Hinduism 388
- Media and Islam 378
- Messianic Movements in African Independent Churches 230
- Meta-ethics 495
- Metaphysics 489
- Metaphysics Central Questions of 549
- Millennial 230
- Missionaries in Zimbabwe 163
- Monarchy 62
- Moral Theories 495
- Muslims, Beliefs and Practices 346
- Muslim Nation-States, Majority 365
- Muslim Population, Growth of 350
- Muslims, Socio-Historical Background of 351
- Narrative Approaches 94ff
- Narrative Theology 221

- Nativistic 230
- Natural vs Revealed Theology 141
- Neo-Colonial Era, Muslims in and beyond the Nation-State 364
- Neutral Research in the study of Religion 278
- New Testament, Survey of 70
- New Testament, Dominant and Recurring Themes in 95
- New Testament, Dynamics of Reading 92
- New Testament, General Understanding of 89
- New Testament, Major Themes in 89
- New Testament, Major Divisions of 90
- New Testament, Points to Bear in Mind 90
- New Testament, the Meaning and Origin of the term 70ff
- Noah and His Three Sons 112
- Non-Consequentialism 508
- North Africa 360

- Oil Factor and Muslims** 366ff
- Old Testament, An Overview of 35
- Old Testament, Major Theological Themes of 51
- Old Testament, the Closing of 48
- Old Testament, the Origins of 38
- Opposition Groups 361
- Oppression, Liberationists' Understanding of 192

- P-Editor of the Pentateuch** 17
- Pastoral Letters (Pauline) 83ff
- Pastoral Letters, the Authorship of 84
- Patriarchs and Matriarchs 54
- Pauline Authorship, Reasons for Denying 83
- Pauline Letters 80
- Persecution and Violence 338
- Pentateuch, Authorship of 41
- Pentecostal/Charismatic 315
- Pentecostalism in Africa 326
- Phenomenological Approach 153
- Phenomenology of Religion, Historical Development of 263

- Phenomenology of Religion, Key Concepts in 266
- Phenomenology of Religion, Feminist Critiques of 277
- Phenomenology of Religion, Contemporary Scholarship in 277
- Philosophical Methodology 412
- Philosophical Metaphysics in Africa 539
- Philosophical Metaphysics in Africa, Approaches 544
- Philosophical Period 388
- Philosophical Sagacity 548
- Philosophy 458
- Philosophy, Aims and Activities 408
- Philosophy and the Batswana 518
- Philosophy and other disciplines 490
- Philosophy, Branches of 517
- Philosophy, Culture and Philosophy as part of Culture 461
- Philosophy, Defining of 402
- Philosophy, Ethics and other Branches of 524
- Philosophy, the Meaning of 517
- Philosophy, the Value of 413
- Philosophy, Western & African 159
- Plural Marriages 122
- Pneumatology 241
- Politics, Morality and law 499
- Post Colonial Criticism 29
- Post-Colonial Era, Challenges in 370
- Praxis Approach 153
- Precious Store Society 332
- Problematisation of the Nomenclature used 253
- Production of Meaning 94
- Prophecy in the Old Testament 65
- Prophetic 230
- Prophetic Books, Compilation of 46
- Prophets 46
- Protestants Missions in African 323
- Pyrrlonism 451
- Rationalism** 443
- Rationalism and Empiricism 443
- Religion, Race, Gender and Identity 107
- Reader(s), the Role of 93
- Reading and Understanding the Bible as an African 115, 126, 132
- Reading the New Testament 91
- Relativism, the Strengths of 504
- Religion in Africa, Phenomenology of 273
- Religion, Essence of 274
- Religion, Irreducibility of 272
- Religious Phenomena, Accurate Naming and Description of 271
- Religion, Phenomenology of 263
- Religion, Refining of 259
- Religious Functionaries 122
- Religious Practices of the Muslims 346
- Religious Studies, Introduction of 252
- Religious Studies, Issues in the Study of 259
- Religious Symbolism 123
- Resurrection 101
- Revealed Christian Theology, Subdivisions of 142
- Revelation and Reason 185
- Revelation, the Book of 86ff
- Revival 230
- Rise of the AICS, Factors that Contributed to 329
- Ritual Purification 121
- Role of Liberation Theology 177
- Roman Catholic Church in Africa, the Growth of 320
- Roman Catholic Vatican Council 321
- Sacrifices** 121
- Separatist theology of African Independent Churches 231
- Seventh Day Adventists 315
- Schools and Hospitals 327
- Science and Rationality 426
- Science and Value 430
- Science, Definition 417
- Science, Method in 420
- Scientific Research, Ethical Problems and the Process 434
- Scientific Research, Ethical Problems at the Preliminary Stage of 432
- Scramble for Africa 358
- Scripture 154, 183
- Skepticism 439
- Soteriology 243

- Source Criticism 16
- Specialized Medical Missions 325
- Sudan and Nigeria 369
- Supernaturalism 502
- Syncretistic movement in African
 - Independent Churches 230
- Synoptic Gospels 75
- Synoptic Problem 75

- Text(s), the Role of in New Testament**
 - study 94
- Thematic Approaches 95ff
- Theology and Social Advocacy 221
- Theological Method 151
- Theology in Human Life, the Emergence
 - of 161
- Theology of African Independent
 - Churches, Development of 231
- Theology of AIC, some Aspects of 239
- Tradition and Experience 184
- Trinity 240
- Twentieth Century Scene in Islam 359

- Universalism 547
- Upanishadic Period 387
- Utilitarianism 512
- Utilitarianism, Objections to 514

- Vedic Culture, the Beginnings 384

- 'War-on-Terror' Campaign, Political
 - Sector in 374
- Wisdom Movement in Israel 44
- Wisdom Literature, Characteristics of 45
- Witchcraft Eradication in African
 - Independent Churches 230
- Witness as a Resurrection theme 102
- Worship in the Bible and African culture
 - 123
- Women Missionaries, Increase in Africa
 - 325
- Writings 44
- West Africa 352, 363
- Westernization 324

- Zimbabwe, Contextual Analysis of 163
- Zionist, Spiritual and Prophetic Churches
 - 333

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